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**LEADING WITH A FOCUS ON EQUITY:  
IDENTIFYING THE LEADERSHIP TRAITS AND ACTIONS OF A  
SUPERINTENDENT PERCEIVED TO BE A SOCIAL JUSTICE  
LEADER**

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**by  
Brian Paul Hill**

**Treatise**

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## **Dedication**

I dedicate this work, first, to my wife, Caitlin Hill. Thank you so much for supporting me through this long and crazy journey. I could not have done this without you. I love you.

Next, I dedicate this work to my mom, Elizabeth Crowe. Raising me on your own since the age of 17...you've shown me what it looks like to work hard and persevere. Thank you for raising me and for always believing in me. I love you.

Next, I dedicate this work to my nana, Georgia Hill. Although no longer with us, I know she is smiling down right now. Thank you for always supporting me growing up and for loving me unconditionally.

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## **Abstract**

# **LEADING WITH A FOCUS ON EQUITY: IDENTIFYING THE LEADERSHIP TRAITS AND ACTIONS OF A SUPERINTENDENT PERCEIVED TO BE A SOCIAL JUSTICE LEADER**

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2018

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As demographics in urban school districts become increasingly diverse, social justice leadership in the K-12 setting is necessary to meet the needs of all students. Much has been written about social justice leadership at the school principal level, but there is a need to further explore social justice leadership at the superintendent level, with a specific focus on equity and access for all students.

A social justice leader is defined as someone that keeps at the center of their practice and vision issues of race, class, gender, disability, sexual orientation, and other historically marginalizing factors. As schools are becoming more diverse, the role of the district leader has evolved from a just a manager of the district to a transformational and



social justice leader who recognizes inequities in the systems that are in place and disrupts the status quo.

The purpose of this study was to identify the traits and actions of a school district superintendent, perceived to be a social justice leader, and how he addresses equity. To this end, the researcher explored experiences, relationships, actions used by the superintendent to achieve equitable goals, and navigating the politics of a large urban district, while attempting to keep social justice at the forefront of every decision made. Therefore, the researcher followed a constructionist epistemology with a qualitative research case study approach. Data was collected, coded, and categorized following an inductive process. The use of multiple sources of data allowed for the triangulation of that data. The intent was to develop emerging themes that surfaced from the data analysis.

Findings revealed that the superintendent, perceived to be a social justice leader, exemplifies the traits of being culturally competent, equity driven, and inclusive of all students; carries out actions such as making equitable organizational changes and courageous decision making; uses the strategies of relational leadership and a whole child education; and draws on personal and professional experiences as a foundation that drives his work as a social justice leader. Collectively these traits, actions, strategies and experiences resulted in changes at the district level, which in turn contributed to the progress the district made in creating a more equitable system for all students.

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## **Chapter I: Introduction to The Study**

The student demographics of school districts have changed over time. School districts are becoming more diverse as access to public education has expanded to more citizens of the U.S. In Texas, for example, urban school districts are seeing a drastic increase of minority students and low-income students enrolling in schools. The number of English Language Learners (also known as Emergent Bilinguals) has increased as well. Such increase prompted an evolution in the skills and knowledge of the school district leader (the superintendent) to meet the diverse needs of these growing populations. Meeting or addressing the increasing demands of a more diverse student population calls for school superintendents to embrace social justice leadership. There is a substantial consensus from the field of education that a school district leader is a critical player in the success or failure of a school, and that district superintendents make a significant impact on student academic performance (Reis, Lu, and Miller, 2016). While the teacher, being the most critical factor in a student's success, is the most important person a school should invest in and support, the superintendent is the one person that can move district-wide leadership or central office leadership in the right direction when it comes to student academic achievement. An effective superintendent in the K-12 setting can make a large-scale impact on a school district in a positive way.

As the role of the superintendent has evolved from a manager of the school district to a social justice leader. As a result, the superintendent must recognize inequities

in the practices (discipline practices, segregated schools, teacher quality in low-income schools, etc.) that are in place and must disrupt those practices to provide a more equitable environment and experience for all students in that setting. These systems of inequity, which create gaps in opportunities afforded to students and, in turn, lead to "achievement gaps," might have been in place before a superintendent took over the district, or they could have surfaced after their arrival. Regardless, district leaders today must be able to recognize those inequitable systems and practices and make changes to create a more equitable system that benefits every child in the district.

With the role of the district leader in the K-12 setting changing drastically over time, no longer is the superintendent seen as just the manager of a school district. The roles of urban school district superintendents have evolved, and there is a need for the development of social justice leadership skills to go along with those managerial skills like budget planning, discipline management, etc. According to previous research on school leadership, social justice leadership is necessary for K-12 school organizations because it helps to enable a school to disrupt the school-to-prison pipeline, addresses achievement gaps, and focuses on a student's background/culture as an asset versus a deficit (Theoharis, 2009).

Theoharis defines a social justice leader as, "someone that keeps at the center of their practice and vision issues of race, class, gender, disability, sexual orientation, and other historically marginalizing factors" (2009, p.9). Others include issues of equity and



the ability to address the needs of all students. Therefore, there is a need for leadership at the top to focus on issues of race, class, gender, etc. when making decisions if a change is to occur that is in the best interest of all students and to achieve academic equity.

According to Singleton and Linton (2006) equity means, "raising the achievement of all students while narrowing the gaps between the highest and lowest performing students and eliminating the racial predictability and disproportionality of which student groups occupy the highest and lowest achievement categories" (p. 46). While social justice leadership might be seen as the umbrella, equity is the umbrella tube that runs through its center. Social justice leadership cannot happen without equity as a focus. These two constructs (social justice and equity) are relevant to this study, as the intent is to highlight the key traits and actions of a superintendent that is seen as a social justice leader who leads through a lens focused on equity.

Meeting and addressing the increasing needs of a more diverse student population at all school levels involves school superintendents embracing a social justice style of leadership (Theoharis, 2009). The call for social justice leadership within the public-school system is forcing school and district leaders to focus on gaining knowledge and better understanding around equity to meet students' needs in an ever-changing, diverse school community.

## **Statement of the Problem**

As student demographics in urban school districts become increasingly diverse, social justice leadership in the K-12 setting is necessary to meet the needs of all students. Much has been written about social justice leadership at the school principal level (Theoharis, 2009; Vogel, 2011). Researchers have noticed that a principal that embraces social justice leadership exhibits specific characteristics, skills, knowledge, and understanding of the needs of all students, and how administrators and teachers carry out social justice at the campus level (Affolter and Hoffman, 2015; Kemp-Graham, 2014). However, most of the research related to social justice leadership has focused on campus-level leadership, in particular, the principal (Kose, 2007; Miller, 2013). Therefore, it is imperative to further explore social justice leadership at the superintendent level, with a specific focus on equity and access for all students. Few have examined social justice at the superintendent level. For instance, Kelly (2016) has examined social justice leadership at the superintendent level in relation to accountability. She specifically observed, "how the concepts intersect in their practice, and what the actions are that superintendents take in their attempt to satisfy accountability conditions while addressing various causes of social justice in their districts" (Kelley, 2016, p. vii). While accountability is an important topic to focus on, it isn't the only aspect that requires social justice leadership at the superintendent level. Another study examined perceptions of social justice leadership at the superintendent level (Alsbury and Whitaker, 2007). These

researchers included superintendents in different settings with different contexts to identify their understanding related to social justice. Therefore, additional studies of social justice leadership should focus on the superintendent level. As Kelley (2016) suggests, to enhance our understanding of social justice leadership at the central office level, we must also determine, “what this means for leadership and how a leader’s dedication to improvement and equity affects student outcomes, one must examine the actual work of leading a school district recognized for working toward social justice goals” (p. 5). In addition, others suggest that current work on social justice and leadership is limited (Theoharis, 2007 and Vogel, 2011) and therefore it is imperative to investigate, “the ways in which leaders enact justice” (Theoharis, 2007, p. 222).

### **Purpose of the Study and Research Questions**

The purpose of this study was to identify the traits and actions of a school district superintendent, perceived to be a social justice leader, and how he addresses equity. This qualitative case study answered the following questions:

1. What traits does a superintendent, perceived to be a social justice leader, embody to address equity in schools?
2. What actions does a superintendent, perceived to be a social justice leader, take to address equity in schools?
3. How does a superintendent, perceived to be a social justice leader, address equity in a school district?

4. What experiences does a superintendent, perceived to be a social justice leader, credit to his focus on equity?

### **Brief Overview of Methodology**

A qualitative method allowed the researcher to identify and analyze the everyday characteristics, traits, and decisions that a social justice superintendent made to provide equity and equitable outcomes for all students. Further, this qualitative research was conducted using the case study method, described by Creswell (2007) as "the study of a case within a real-life, contemporary context or setting" (p. 97). Case study research involves an empirical investigation of a contemporary phenomenon within its natural context using multiple sources of evidence (Yin, 2009).

Through purposeful selection, participants were asked to be included in the study. This study followed Stake's approach to case studies regarding "intrinsic case studies" because "first and last the researcher wants a better understanding of this case" (Stake, 2003, p. 136). According to Stake "intrinsic casework regularly begins with cases already identified...the cases are of prominent interest before formal study begins" (Stake, 2003, p. 151). Therefore, a superintendent that serves a large urban district with a diverse student body was invited to participate. The researcher became aware of this case (superintendent) through references by district staff that they believed the superintendent focused on social justice, evidence from media and public releases referencing to the

superintendent as someone focused on social justice issues and district sources pointing to social justice work lead by the district superintendent.

Additionally, other participants were selected according to specific criteria, ensuring that they represented “those informants through whom the case can be known” (Stake, 2003, p. 140). These participants included cabinet members, a board member and campus administrators, representing elementary, middle, and high schools.

The researcher used three key sources for data collection. These included semi-structured interviews with participants, observations of relevant events and activities, and district documentation pertaining to the superintendent’s leadership.

Data were collected, coded, and categorized following an inductive process (Denzin and Lincoln, 2003). The use of multiple sources of data allowed for the triangulation of that data. The intent was to develop emerging themes that surfaced from the data analysis.

### **Definition of Terms**

Academic Equity - Raising the academic achievement of all students while narrowing the gaps between the highest and lowest performing students and eliminating the racial predictability and disproportionality of which student groups occupy the highest and lowest achievement categories (Singleton and Linton, 2006).

Achievement Gap – The gap that exists between white students and students of color on academic achievement and mastery on state mandated tests.

K-12 – A shortened term used to describe schools that serve students from Kindergarten to 12<sup>th</sup> grade.

Opportunity Gap – The gap that exists between students that are afforded opportunities to demonstrate their capabilities and students that are not.

Social Justice Leader – A school leader that “keeps at the center of his or her practice and vision issues of race, class, gender, disability, sexual orientation, and other historically marginalizing factors” (Theoharis, 2009, p. 11).

Superintendent – leader of a public-school district, often selected by a school board of elected officials.

### **Limitations/Delimitations**

Given the nature of qualitative research and a single case approach, it was not possible to make wide generalizations (Stake, 2003). The main focus was on a single

superintendent and how he addressed equity in an urban school district. The researcher did not intend to evaluate the overall performance of the participant.

### **Assumptions**

It was assumed that the superintendent in this study had demonstrated traits and actions of a social justice leader. It was further assumed that he addressed equity in his daily work. It was assumed that the participants had an adequate level of experience working with the superintendent to provide enough information that led to whether or not he was a social justice leader and the traits and actions that were used to promote social justice. It was also assumed that the participants had a general understanding of what social justice and equity were.

### **Significance of the Study**

The findings of this study contribute to the knowledge base about traits and actions social justice leaders in the K-12 public school setting possess, and what they do to promote equity. Specifically, this study generated details about how a social justice superintendent promotes a more equitable experience for all students. It also expanded the research on social justice leadership at the district level. As Kelley (2015) suggests, focusing on how superintendents understand and enact social justice leadership calls for additional research. Further, human resources and school boards can use the findings of this study to select and hire a superintendent that will focus on academic success and equity for all students in their school district. Superintendent preparation programs could

take into account the information from this study when developing preparation standards and designing superintendent courses that focus on equity and high academic achievement for all students.

## **Summary**

The purpose of this study was to identify the traits and actions of a school district superintendent, perceived to be a social justice leader, and how he addresses equity. Social justice leadership is necessary for K-12 school systems as it allows leaders the ability to disrupt the school-to-prison pipeline, address achievement gaps, and focuses on a student's background/culture as an asset versus a deficit. A social justice leader is defined as someone that keeps at the center of their practice and vision issues of race, class, gender, disability, sexual orientation, and other historically marginalizing factors. As schools are becoming more diverse and the role of the district leader has evolved away from a just a manager of the district to a transformational and social justice leader. Superintendents are in a position to recognize inequities in the systems that are in place and to disrupt those systems. Therefore, it was imperative to further explore social justice leadership at the superintendent level to add to the limited research available on that topic. To this end, this chapter included a statement of the problem, the purpose of the study and research questions, a brief overview of the methodology, definitions of terms, limitations and delimitations of the study, assumptions made by the researcher, and the significance of the study.



## **Chapter II: Literature Review**

In order to identify the characteristics and traits of a social justice superintendent, a critical analysis of current research was completed. Three main strands were developed, including the evolution of the role of the superintendent, social justice leadership, and the social justice superintendent. This review of the literature served to establish a gap in the research related to social justice leadership at the superintendency level.

### **Evolution of the Role of the Superintendent**

The student demographics of school districts have changed over time, and there has been a need for district leaders to adjust and be amenable to the diverse needs of a diverse student body. As a result, the role of the superintendent has evolved throughout the history of the public education system. Callahan (1966) with the U.S. Office of Education examined the history of the role of the school district administrator. Earlier roles of the superintendent called for a superintendent to manage the district more like a business. This was out of necessity, as Callahan (1966) states:

because of the weakness of his position in relation to the school board and the community, the superintendent of schools was extremely vulnerable to outside pressure and that to survive he had to bow and scrape and please his master. (p. 6)

Callahan described shifts that happened in the role of the superintendent early on:

which reached its peak in the late forties and remained a potent notion until 1954, can be described as a shift from the conception of the superintendent as a

business-managerial executive type over to a conception of him as an educational statesman in a democratic school...the second change in the conception of the superintendency after 1929 begins after 1945 and is prominent after 1954. In this period, I have described him as a combination applied social scientist and educational realist. (p. 7)

Similarly, a commentary by Kowalski and Bjork (2005) documented the evolution of the role of school leaders for a period of 100 years. Kowalski and Bjork (2005) note:

the earliest role conceptualization of the superintendent as being the school board's clerk. This role, thought to exist for several decades prior to 1850, was predicated on the belief that big city school boards were compelled to employ a figurehead but reluctant to relinquish power. Hence, superintendents during that era were relegated to performing simple clerical and practical tasks. (p. 79)

Based on their work, Kowalski and Bjork suggested multiple “role conceptualizations” of the superintendent. The first was that of the superintendent as “teacher-scholar” from 1850 to the early 1900's. Research pointed out that during this period, superintendents were master teachers that moved up to the superintendent role. The second role was that of "organizational manager" from the early 1900's to 1930. As districts grew larger, the preparation of school superintendents also shifted to provide training on how to manage large organizations. Superintendents were responsible for things like budgets, facility

management, and personnel management. The role of superintendent then shifted to that of "democratic leader" from 1930 to the mid-1950's. During this time, superintendents were urged to "galvanize policymakers, employees, and other taxpayers to support the district initiatives" (Kowalski and Bjork, 2005, p. 83). The superintendent then became an "applied social scientist from the mid-1950's to the mid-1970's." During this time, superintendents "were expected to apply scientific inquiry to the problems and decisions that permeated their practice" (Kowalski and Bjork, 2005, p. 84). Lastly, superintendents adapted to the role of "communicator" from the mid-1970's to 2005. Kowalski and Bjork (2005) note that:

communicative expectations in this position reflected a confluence of reform initiatives and the social environment in which they were being pursued. Virtually every significant school improvement concept and strategy called upon administrators to work collaboratively with others to build and then pursue a collective vision (p. 85).

### **Social Justice Leadership**

While the role of the school district superintendent has evolved over time, a more recent shift towards school leaders needing to focus on issues around social justice has emerged. However, extensive research has mainly addressed social justice leadership at the campus principal level. Previous research has highlighted several constructs related to principals that are known as social justice leaders. These include frameworks, self-

reflection, knowledge and preparation, traits, organizational changes, human resources and school climate.

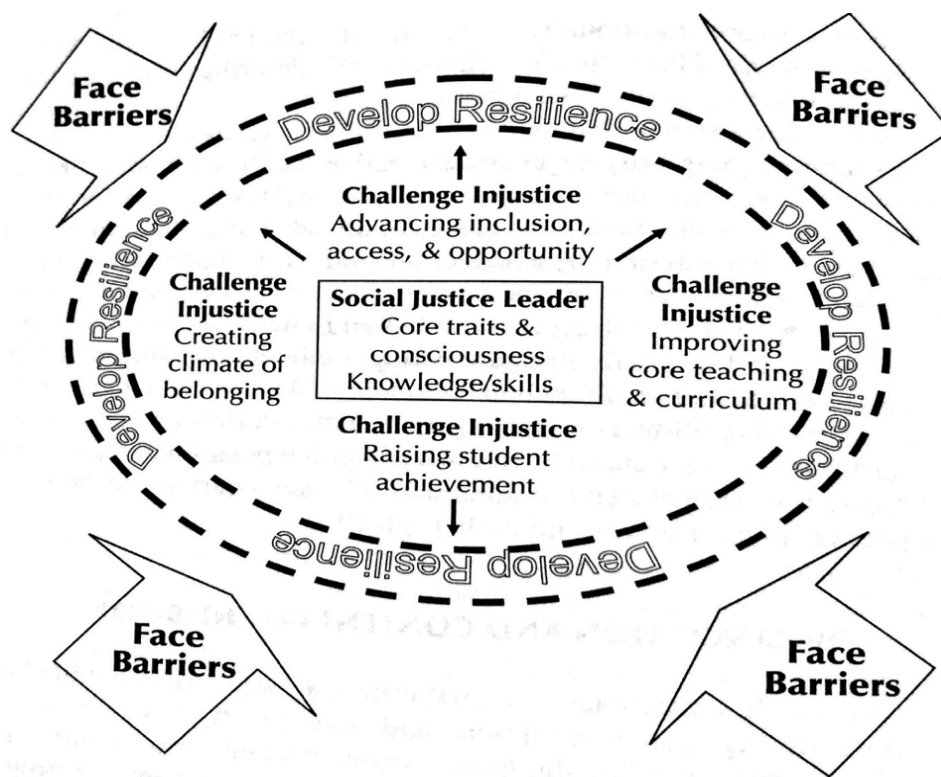
**Frameworks.** For instance, Theoharis (2009) studied principals from different school settings across the US and looked at what characteristics social justice leaders at the campus level have. He defines a social justice leader as, “someone that keeps at the center of their practice and vision issues of race, class, gender, disability, sexual orientation, and other historically marginalizing factors” (p. 7). Much of the research around social justice leadership has focused on the principal level, and the research points to frameworks for social justice leadership, the lack of self-understanding of administrators, training and preparation of social justice leaders, the traits of a social justice leader and the organizational decisions made by social justice leaders.

A framework for social justice leadership adopted by Theoharis in his work *The School Leaders Our Children Deserve: Seven Keys to Equity, Social Justice, and School Reform* was highlighted in many studies. The seven “keys” that Theoharis (2009) advanced when creating a framework for social justice leadership are Acquire Broad, Reconceptualized Consciousness, Knowledge, and Skill Base; Possess Core Leadership Traits; Advance Inclusion, Access, and Opportunity for All; Improve the Core Learning Context - Both the Teaching and The Curriculum; Create A Climate of Belonging; Raise Student Achievement; and Sustain Oneself Professionally and Personally.

Key 1, Acquire Broad, Reconceptualized Consciousness/Knowledge/Skill Base, refers to the need for social justice leaders to have a certain amount of background knowledge when it comes to social justice leadership and the ability to highlight inequities within a school system and make the appropriate changes so that the inequities are eliminated. Key 2, Possess Core Leadership Traits, suggests that social justice leaders must lead with arrogant humility, have a passionate vision, and have a tenacious commitment to justice. Key 3, Advance Inclusion, Access, and Opportunity for All, includes ways that social justice leaders create opportunities for marginalized populations to have access to rigorous academic opportunities that increase learning time and increase the accountability for the achievement of all students. Key 4, Improve the Core Learning Context - Both the Teaching and The Curriculum, addresses issues of race, ongoing staff development focused on building equity, and the hiring practices of school leaders and the supervision of those employees through an equity lens, focuses on the adoption of common research-based curricular approaches, and how the social justice leader empowers staff. Key 5, Create A Climate of Belonging, indicates how a social justice leader creates a warm and welcoming school climate, fosters community building in each classroom, reaches out to marginalized families and the community, incorporates social responsibility into the school curriculum, and uses a proactive and process approach to discipline. Key 6, Raise Student Achievement, refers to how social justice leaders approach accountability systems that historically have only widened the gap between

specific populations and those that have been traditionally marginalized. Lastly, Key 7, Sustain Oneself Professionally and Personally, which illustrates how social justice leaders care for themselves outside of the school environment so that they can better lead their schools (Theoharis, 2009, p. 14-16).

Figure 1 illustrates the relationship amongst the 7 “keys” advanced by Theoharis.



**Figure 1.** Framework for Social Justice Leadership (Theoharis, 2009).

Similarly, Ryan (2006) created a framework for social justice leadership and stated, "as diversity has become more apparent in our schools and communities, the

divisions that separate the advantaged from the disadvantaged have also widened. Not everyone does well in our educational institutions and not everyone is equally advantaged in our communities" (p. 4). Social justice leaders are leaders that must first be conscious of the inequities that exist in systems that marginalize particular groups of students. It becomes incumbent on the field of educational leadership to ground our work in a more critical and progressive conceptual frame that seriously interrogates these discrepancies and creates strategies to do something proactively about them, as pointed out by Gooden and Dantley (2012). A framework of educational leadership must be so designed as to specifically speak to the transitioning student demographics in schools in the United States.

Guerra, Nelson, Jacobs, and Yamamura (2013) examined Brown's (2004) tripartite theoretical framework on leadership preparation and explored the role programmatic elements played in development as social justice leaders within an educational leadership preparation program. According to Guerra, Nelson, Jacobs, and Yamamura (2013) "aspiring leaders require a different set of knowledge, skills, and attitudes than those currently offered in many educational leadership preparation programs" (p. 129). Guerra et al. (2013) go on to state, "preparation programs seeking to develop leaders for social justice must help students develop awareness of the ways in which systemic inequities manifest in schools and how social justice work can begin to redress these issues" (p. 144).

**Leader Self-Understanding.** The lack of self-understanding when it comes to social justice leadership is also a theme that emerged in the research. Some leaders think they are socially just but in practice are not. Capper and Young (2014) identified five ironies and limitations of educational leadership for social justice and concluded with a call to educators for social justice to change their work in several fundamental ways. Despite research showing the benefits of integration, the pressure to segregate students continues (Capper and Young, 2014). DeMatthews (2015) found that most principals believe they already lead in socially just ways, notwithstanding the numerous equity issues in schools associated with race, disability, and poverty. This blindness to the inequities that exist in schools and districts today only perpetuates the gaps between those that have and those that do not. This has led to a shift in the qualities and qualifications necessary for district leaders to be successful. A focus on social justice leadership is now at the forefront.

Research suggested that social justice leadership requires the leader to begin searching within when it comes to their development as a social justice leader. Hernandez, Murakami, and Cerecer (2014) focused on the role that racial identity plays among Latina school principals points out that, “historically marginalized students have suffered greatly due to racism and, as a result, have often been undertaught, systematically been overrepresented in at-risk programs, and rarely been perceived or legitimized as knowledge makers” (p. 570).



According to Vogel (2011) “the development of awareness should be followed by an understanding of theory then continued on to activism” (p. 79). The lack of awareness of the inequities happening within school systems is often caused by “colorblindness.”

Vogel (2011) also mentions:

to truly understand the beliefs, practices, and policies which contribute to the systemic inequities that constitute oppression, a theory of oppression must first be understood. Not understanding the roots of the problems that face children and adults who are “othered” in today’s society would be akin to a doctor focusing on treating an infection with antibiotics without knowledge of the properties of either the antibiotics or the cause of the infections. (p. 78)

Additionally, it is necessary for the social justice leader to recognize these inequities before gaining the necessary knowledge to create change on the campus. Ryan (2006) states, “scholars and educators emphasize that leadership in schools needs to be about deeper moral purposes like social justice because they believe that schools must do their part in contributing to a world that is fair for everyone” (p. 3). Educators for social justice must attune themselves to, and become experts on, the range of student differences and their intersections (Capper, et al., 2014). When the social justice leader is the expert, they can then disseminate that information to their staff. This is how the change can indeed happen.

Kemp-Graham (2014) sought to explore the readiness of recent graduates of Principal Preparation Program in Texas to engage in bold social justice leadership required of 21st Century school leaders. The author notes that:

school leaders for social justice recognize that there are situations, especially in institutions such as public schools where the application of the same rules to unequal groups or marginalized groups such as can be found in 21st century schools can generate unequal results as evidenced by the omnipresent achievement gap, disproportionate suspension rates, high school dropout rates and lack of work or college readiness. (p. 101)

School leaders have yet to realize that to make systemic change for marginalized students, they must first understand their own biases, acknowledge their own deficit thinking, engage in ongoing critical reflection of their beliefs of oppression and social justice, thus becoming aware of the cultural influences in school settings and their own biases that perpetuate the inequitable practices within schools (Kemp-Graham, 2014).

Jenlink and Jenlink (2012) examined the meaning of leadership as a public pedagogy of socially just practice. The authors state:

the educational leader's work, in part, is to illuminate and interrogate injustices. Taking a social justice stance requires that the educational leader interrogate social structures and cultural practices that contribute to injustice, bringing democratic practices to bear so as to mediate cultural dominance, political

ideologies and asymmetries of power that work to reproduce cultures and social structures that foster injustices and inequities in educational settings. (p. 2)

**Knowledge and Preparation.** However, lack of training of leaders to be social justice leaders was also a theme that emerged in the literature. Many school and district leaders have not been trained to properly recognize and address inequities when they happen. Vogel (2011) examined how educators who are either currently enrolled or who have completed an educational leadership preparation program in the past five years at one Rocky Mountain university understand social justice—as a concept and operationally—and the role of multicultural education in promoting social justice in P-12 school settings. According to the author:

While teachers, principals, and superintendents across the nation are acutely aware of the achievement gap data and the consequences of such data in relation to state and federal accountability systems, a systemic view of how schools can successfully educate a diverse student population is not common. (p. 69)

School leader preparation programs for campus and district level administrators are beginning to see the need for more intensive training for aspiring leaders in the areas of equity and social justice leadership, yet many programs still do not properly prepare their students for the complex and diverse school systems they will be in charge of one day.

Diem and Carpenter (2012) believe that certain concepts should be included in leadership preparation programs seeking to develop leaders for diverse settings. These

researchers conclude providing suggestions that could help contribute to the development of a transformative curriculum for leadership preparation programs. According to Diem and Carpenter (2012) “the frames of colorblind racism help to maintain the racial order and provide an appearance of formal equality among individuals without paying much attention to the inequities and inequalities existent within our daily lives” (p. 102).

Everson and Bussey (2007) chronicled the attempt of one university to respond to that criticism in designing a professional degree with an ethical focus on social justice. Lack of knowledge about social justice does not excuse leaders from responsibility for it. Leaders who are unaware or uninformed about equity and fairness issues, which they face every day, still live with the moral imperative that is embedded in their jobs.

Boske (2012) studied the outcomes of a course in “leadership for social justice” which is based on transformational learning experiences centered on issues of social justice. The author uses case studies and pattern matching to yield three emergent themes in the students’ experiences. The author states:

school leaders within increasingly culturally diverse school communities will need the knowledge, skills and willingness to address issues facing marginalized populations in order to understand how cultural issues (i.e., race and race relations) within and between various school subcultures influence leadership practice. (p. 184)

As schools become more and more diverse and the gaps continue to widen between specific groups of students, the knowledge gained by the social justice leader about what is causing these gaps will better inform their practice.

**Traits.** Much of the research pointed to certain traits or skills that social justice leaders must possess when looking to make change. For example, a passionate vision for equity that comes from being closely connected to the work at hand is a characteristic of the social justice leader. This passionate vision is delivered to the staff with the intention of them “getting on board” too.

The knowledge gained through prior research suggests new skills that the social justice leader did not necessarily have before. These new skills, such as the ability to recognize systemic inequities and practices that cause certain groups of students to underperform, can be used to enact change with equity as the goal. When one critically reflects on these and other similar data, it becomes necessary, as an educational leader, to propose and design an agenda of reform whose focus is to rid the system, writ large, of policies and practices that lead to these shameful discriminatory results (Gooden, et al., 2012). According to DeMatthews, et al., (2015) “principals must critically reflect on power, privilege, and inequities in society if they wish to lead for social justice” (p. 26). They do this through becoming conscious of the inequities that are present in their own school systems, gaining knowledge about how to address the inequities, and applying skills they have learned to make real change.

Certain traits, like the desire to close achievement gaps and to seek equitable outcomes for all students, are possessed by social justice leaders that can be attributed to the equitable change they create on their campuses. They lead with confidence and humility, at the same time. Theoharis (2009) calls this arrogant humility.

Social justice leaders also have a tenacious commitment to justice that allows them to not back down in the face of adversity. As Garza (2008) mentions “children do not fail, but rather the school system fails them. Many educators subscribe to the pervasive deficit-thinking paradigm and blame students and their families for students’ academic failure” (p. 164). Thus, with a tenacious commitment to justice, the social justice leader does not let deficit thinking get in the way of doing what is right. Principals must confront a number of unique challenges when working with a student population where the majority of students are considered to be at-risk for school failure, and thus the principals must have the capacity to engage in, and facilitate, social justice-oriented conversations with students, parents, and community stakeholders (Diem, et al., 2012). This capacity is built further as the social justice leader’s tenacious commitment to justice intensifies. Searching to find ways to include all students in the activities and programs that are offered at the school is another trait that a social justice leader possesses. The segregation of poor and minority students from certain rigorous programs like gifted and talented and AP courses have been in place in schools for a long time, and it has helped to further the achievement gap between student groups due to the lack of opportunities

for poor and minority students. Social justice leaders also increase time spent on meaningful tasks for marginalized students and, in turn, increase the accountability for the achievement of all students.

An autoethnography by Garza (2008) notes the challenges a principal encountered in their efforts to maintain their commitment to leadership for social justice. The author states "leading for social justice incites political unrest because the hegemonic culture will resist change that provides equity to all members of society" (p. 163). The social justice leader, leading with arrogant humility, does not let this stop him from challenging the status quo because they are confident that they are right because they have witnessed the inequities. DeMatthews, et al. (2015) claim that "ethical principles can direct decision-making processes by reframing decision problems and establishing new possibilities. Although understanding and clarifying ethical principles will not always resolve all dilemmas, principals can provide a more coherent rationale for decision-making in perplexing situations" (p. 25). This more coherent rationale stems from the confidence the social justice leader has and the arrogant humility they show.

Bjork and Keedy (2007) examined the nature and direction of social changes in the USA population, characteristics of children in schools, and the gender and racial make-up of school district leaders. The research mentions "more resources should be allocated to improve circumstances of those historically least favored by the system

rather than treating all individuals equally. The notion of social justice suggests that treating all people equally may be inherently unequal” (p. 407).

In its simplest form, equity is linked to redressing problems by giving more to those who have less (Bjork, et al., 2007). The ability of the social justice leader to analyze inequity problems and create solutions increases the inclusion of those that have been historically marginalized. One example of this from Gooden, et al., (2012) states:

prophetic voice questions why often the most inexperienced teachers are given assignments in some of our toughest schools. It interrogates why there are so few Black children and other students of color in advanced or gifted and talented classes and why schools in the same school district are dramatically different in the quality of education being offered. (p. 241)

Being able to recognize this inequity in the school system allows the educator to think of ways to better incorporate everyone in the access to higher-level programs.

Social justice leaders must be able to address issues of race with their staff freely and openly. As Diem, et al. (2012) states:

the preparation of today’s school leaders must include a more purposeful focus on building the conversational skills necessary to facilitate social justice-oriented conversations within their schools, particularly conversations about the variety of complex issues pertaining to race and racism...Contemporary society has shown that engaging in conversations about race and racism is typically difficult and



often met with great apprehension. Indeed, many people would rather not talk about issues of race and racism, refuse to acknowledge that racism is salient and racial differences exist, and believe that the color of one's skin has nothing to do with the opportunities available in society. (p. 97)

A social justice stance is, in part, an ethical leadership disposition that serves to guide a leader's actions and decisions, and at the same time a social justice stance serves as moral lens through which the educational leader reflects upon his or her actions and those presented by others (Jenlink et al., 2012).

Social justice leaders connect with the community and make a point to reach out to groups that have traditionally been marginalized. DeMatthews, et al. (2015) states "the idea of a desirable or undesirable choice must be driven by values aligned to the principal and community's beliefs" (p. 24). "Deep, equitable, and sustainable reform" requires the involvement of groups outside the system such as community organizing groups (Khalifa, 2013). Social justice leaders value the community's input and realize that real change comes when you work with the people you serve and not on or against them.

Social justice leaders must not forget to take care of themselves professionally and personally. They must develop a supportive administrative network and work together for a change. Building relationships is critical and, as Bjork, et al. (2007) points out "mentoring is of critical importance in inducting aspiring superintendents into the profession and assisting veteran chief executive officers as they learn new skills" (p.

420). The practice of social justice leadership in a high-poverty urban school district creates numerous leadership challenges requiring a principal to draw upon their skills, experiences, and personal strength (DeMatthews, 2015). Social justice leaders must build a network that helps them grow professionally and focus on prioritizing their life outside of school.

**Organizational Changes.** Research pointed to the changes that social justice leaders must make within the organization once they have become aware of inequities and are trained on how to address them. Once the social justice leader is conscious, or aware, of the injustice that is happening in specific systems and programs within the school, they begin to gain knowledge through research on the effects of the inequities and ways to disrupt the inequities. Although a social justice orientation is vital to creating more socially just schools, principals must also be knowledgeable about decision-making processes and pitfalls so that they can select the best possible alternative and also recognize the implications of their actions (DeMatthews, et al., 2015).

The social justice leader must spend time investigating current practices within the school to address the areas of inequity. Although discrepancies, inequities, and discriminatory practices may be historical, they may also be a product of how we structure school systems and educate children in the country differently based on race (Gooden, et al., 2012).

Dematthews, Carrola, and Mungal (2015) looked at the relationship between social justice leadership and organizational decision making in order to make recommendations for how leaders can create more socially just decisions in difficult school contexts. The authors state:

African American students, Hispanic students, students in poverty, and students with disabilities remain more likely to be suspended, expelled, drop out, fail to meet state proficiency levels, and less likely to be included in general education classrooms, attend schools with sufficient resources, and interact with well-prepared teachers. The field of educational leadership has more recently posited that school leaders with social justice orientations can help alleviate these inequities. (p.17)

The inability to recognize and intervene when inequities are present has led to traditionally marginalized student populations becoming even more marginalized and left behind. School and district leaders must be better equipped to recognize these inequities so that they can address them head-on.

Others speak to the challenges leaders face, such as DeMatthews, et al. (2015) who points out:

principals can fail to identify the best possible decision because they 1) lack the cognitive capacity to consider all possible alternatives, 2) are subjected to influences and pressures, and 3) struggle with organizational uncertainty and

legitimacy. Thus, a principal's social justice orientation or worldview is necessary and important to the creation of more socially just schools, but not sufficient given the complexity of schools and decisions. (p. 18)

(Burns and DiPaola, 2013) examined how Virginia public high schools used correlational analysis to measure the strength of the relationships between organizational justice and organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) and their effects on student achievement. According to the authors, in order to improve academic outcomes for all students, social justice leaders have to examine the practices happening on their campuses and begin to build staff capacity, re-center staff learning on equity and justice issues, adopt current curriculum approaches, and create a climate that respects, appreciates, and empowers teachers as professionals. School principals and decision-making leaders must be perceived as fair, respectful, and equitable by classroom teachers in order to create necessary change (Burns and DiPaola, 2013).

**Human Resources.** Engaging in ongoing staff development that is focused on building equity within the school systems is the work of a social justice leader. School leaders must have facility in critically reflecting on the exigencies of marginalization that are replete in educational institutions but then must also offer solutions, tactics, or strategies to tackle these discriminatory practices (Gooden, et al., 2012).

Social justice leaders also hire and supervise with a lens set on equity. Khalil, et al. (2015) states:

school leaders pursued candidates who reflected qualities the authors interpret as the 3 C's: (a) cultural competency including cultural awareness, experience, and understanding; (b) communication skills bridging urban teaching and learning; and (c) commitment to serve the students and the community. Finding a dynamic candidate embodying the 3 C's in conjunction with content competency was at the heart of the hiring challenge. (p. 79)

By hiring and supervising teachers with a lens on equity and equitable practices, the social justice leader creates a staff that is focused on improving outcomes for all students and is more open to growing professionally in that area.

The adoption of current research-based curriculum approaches that focus on higher student outcomes for all is another characteristic or trait of a social justice leader. Social justice leaders, centering curricular and pedagogical goals on the interests, realities, and lives of the students, increase teachers' expectation and promote student achievement (Khalil, et al., 2015). Research also points out that in terms of *within-school* factors related to student achievement, school leadership quality is second only to the effects of the quality of curriculum and teacher instruction (Reis, et al., 2016).

Social justice leaders empower their staff and treat them as the professionals that they are. By giving them the tools necessary to lead their classrooms in a way that focuses on equity and rigorous lessons with high academic outcomes, teachers are empowered to take risks and trust their students more. Effective communicators must be

able to read social cues and use non- verbal expressions. These are often dependent upon cultural contexts. Teachers need to be empowered to be able to read these cues. By empowering teachers, social justice leaders educate the whole school community about inclusive issues, which is important because administrators, teachers, students, and parents, particularly those in more diverse settings, generally know too little about each other, about exclusive practices such as racism, and how to approach and implement inclusive practices (Ryan, 2006).

**School Climate.** Creating a climate of belonging in schools that is warm and welcoming, fosters community building in each classroom, reaches out to marginalized families and the community, incorporates social responsibility into the school curriculum, and uses a proactive and process approach to discipline is the work of a social justice leader.

Santamaria and Santamaria (2015) conducted comparative case studies featuring educational leaders in the United States and New Zealand who counter injustice in their practice. This contribution considers educational leadership practice to promote and sustain diversity. The authors state:

if educators and educational stakeholders are to advance and improve the ways in which they provide education for children who constitute the bulk of global achievement gaps, leaders at the ‘top’ need to be as compassionate, generous, and responsible as possible... connecting deeply to the community by grounding and

sharing leadership practice in ways that ensure its sustainability and key role in supporting improvement and positive educational change. (p. 35)

Compassion and generosity lead to better understanding of student backgrounds and allows social justice leaders and their staff to create more of a climate of belonging.

Fostering a climate of belonging that is warm, and welcoming, is also recognized in the discipline practices and philosophies of the social justice leader and their staff. An emerging research base on the intersectionality of black students and their experiences in public schools have presented compelling empirical evidence that black students are subject to disproportionate use of exclusionary discipline for behaviors that are associated with subjective, sometimes biased, decision- making by teachers and school leaders. The cultural incongruence that results in unequal discipline experienced by many black students results from school leaders and school disciplinarians' lack of understanding of the cultural norms and mores of students who do not look or act like them (Kemp-Graham, 2015).

Working to close the achievement gap without putting too much emphasis on standardized testing is another area the social justice leader focuses on. Social justice leaders realize that in many ways standardized testing marginalizes specific groups even more, and only focusing on testing will feed an inequitable machine. While that is the case, social justice leaders still realize that testing associated with NCLB further

highlighted the racial disparities in achievement among student groups (Hernandez, et al., 2014). Capper, et al. (2014) describe:

a social justice leader with "unwavering faith in students' abilities" to academically excel, coupled with both a recognition that differences in students' home and neighborhood environments have tangible implications, as well as "a constant commitment to 'meeting them [students] where they were.'" In sum, in the current educational policy context that emphasizes student learning and achievement, scholars and educators for social justice send mixed messages on the role that student learning and performance should play in this work...educators for social justice should make increased student learning and achievement the primary goal of their work. One can debate how learning is best measured, one can agree that learning gains represent just one facet of a student's wellbeing and that educational practice needs to be linked to community transformation; but in the end, if a child cannot read, write, communicate, and compute at grade level or beyond, that child's educational and life odds are severely diminished. (p. 161)

The social justice leader recognizes the impact low achievement on a standardized test has on their students, and no matter how hard a student works toward achieving his/her goals, the systemic barriers existent within the educational system work to perpetuate inequalities within schools (Diem, et al., 2012).



Also, a study by Kose (2007) examined the professional development offered to district leaders on the topic of social justice and how that transfers from the central office level down to the campus level. The author states that social justice leaders of schools and districts create systems that support increased academic achievement and use data to "continuously examine whether student learning is equitable for all student groups, and encourage teachers to critically examine their practice for possible bias in regard to race, class, and gender" (p. 279). This transfer of social justice focused learning, which the superintendent receives, down to the campus is essential if the school leaders, who work with the students every day, are to improve outcomes for all children.

Previous research focused mainly on principals and not as much on superintendents. Therefore, there was a need to examine the research around social justice leadership at the superintendent level.

### **The Social Justice Superintendent**

While extensive research has examined social justice leadership at the school principal level, research on social justice leadership at the superintendent level is limited. Previous research has only focused on the social justice superintendent's commitment to social justice, the hiring practices they use for change, community involvement around social justice and the impact social justice superintendents have on accountability.

Some researchers used data drawn from autoethnographic work on social justice leadership and a qualitative study on the lives of antiracist leaders. For instance, Affolter

and Hoffman (2015) suggest methods for leaders to work together to build inclusive schools dedicated to equity, excellence, and social justice. In researching social justice leadership at the superintendent level, Affolter and Hoffman (2015) point out that:

district leaders need to be overt in their commitment to social justice in their schools. This overt commitment needs to be demonstrated in their actions, their policies, their budgets, their guidance of school boards, and in their support for principals. This support naturally frames the way principals approach their work and impacts the leadership they are able to provide for teachers. (p. 364)

Other researchers conducted a four-year study on superintendent perceptions of and experiences with educational leadership related to school improvement, democratic community and social justice (Alsbury and Whitaker, 2007). This study highlighted social justice leaders' perceptions and experiences with leadership in education as it relates to social justice. The researchers found that in practice, social justice at the superintendent level must be a combination of moral purpose or democracy and community. The authors state that there is a "need to expand definitions and practices of accountability, social justice, and democratic decision-making" (Alsbury and Whitaker, 2007, p. 171).

Horsford (2010) examined the experiential knowledge and wisdom of practice of former Black school superintendents who attended all Black segregated schools and led desegregated school districts. Horsford (2010) points out that "before a community can

play a role in shaping school board politics, there needs to be a community-wide vision for education that articulates why education is important to the community and what they are willing to do to ensure it” (p. 67). The social justice leader’s ability to get the community on board with their vision is a skill that the social justice leader acquires once they have a passionate vision to share. Inclusive leadership consists of a number of distinct practices. They include advocating for inclusion, educating participants, developing critical consciousness, nurturing dialogue, emphasizing student learning and classroom practice, adopting inclusive decision- and policymaking strategies, and incorporating whole school approaches (Ryan, 2006). Leading with a passionate vision allows the social justice leader to clearly articulate their vision and have the school staff follow their lead.

A more recent single-case study conducted by Kelley examined the superintendent as a social justice leader and how the role intersects with the state and federal accountability systems. As Kelley (2016) asserts, “the relationship between social justice and accountability is an important one. It is complex and dynamic, based on context and changes in local and state priorities and politics. To focus on accountability without consideration of social justice issues may result in proposing flawed reform agendas” (p. 106). Superintendents must focus not only on accountability measures and achieving the highest scores, but also focus on whether the practices they are allowing to be applied in the district are socially just. Kelly further states that "to understand what

this means for leadership and how a leader's dedication to improvement and equity affects student outcomes, one must examine the actual work of leading a school district recognized for working toward social justice goals. The author also claims that research on the way superintendents enact justice is absent in the research:

closer analysis of each component of the intersection between the influence of accountability on superintendent decision-making and leading for social justice may provide more insight on which aspects are the most powerful for producing improved student outcomes. How to more quickly impact student achievement may be realized by more closely examining how leaders implement inclusive practices and community, raise critical consciousness of their staff and students, utilize public and transparent achievement data and measures, and determine appropriate instructional leadership responsibilities. How and when leaders divulge performance data, indications of progress toward social justice goals, and the rationale for curriculum and instructional programming decisions are also factors to consider when learning more about how accountability and social justice intersect in everyday decision-making (p. 107).

Acknowledging the need for further inquiry, Kelley (2016) notes that the study provides “some empirical evidence on the ways superintendents understand and enact social justice while striving to achieve accountability policy, examples which have

largely been absent from the literature” (p. 106). She further suggests that there is also a need to investigate different types of districts and their sizes and how superintendents who “perceive themselves as social justice leaders may also contribute to the literature on improving student achievement outcomes and closing achievement gaps” (Kelley, 2016, p. 108).

While few have addressed social justice leadership at the superintendent level, most studies that have focused on the superintendent through specific lenses like accountability. Therefore, more research must be conducted through a broader sense of what makes a social justice superintendent.

### **Summary**

While we know that social justice leadership is recognized as a necessary means to address inequity in schools (Theoharis, 2009), such research addresses principals as social justice leaders for the most part. Researchers have advanced definitions, practices, and skills that can be attributed to the leadership of a social justice leader, but mainly at the principal level. Thus, research should be expanded with a focus on leadership levels above the campus principal. If a superintendent promotes the need for a focus on social justice leadership and equitable practices, then the principals are more likely to focus on that as well. Without a focus on social justice leadership at the school district level, campuses will continue to function on an island versus being part of a district goal and

focus on social justice leadership. Therefore, there was a need to explore the traits and actions of a superintendent perceived to be a social justice leader.

## **Chapter III: Methodology and Procedures**

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this chapter is to describe the methods and design used to conduct a case study. This chapter will include the research method and design, the population and sample studied, the instruments for data collection, the data collection procedures and the data analysis procedures.

### **Purpose of the Study and Research Questions**

The purpose of this study was to identify the traits and actions of a school district superintendent, perceived to be a social justice leader, and how he addressed equity. The qualitative case study answered the following questions:

1. What traits does a superintendent, perceived to be a social justice leader, embody to address equity in schools?
2. What actions does a superintendent, perceived to be a social justice leader, take to address equity in schools?
3. How does a superintendent, perceived to be a social justice leader, address equity in a school district?
4. What experiences does a superintendent, perceived to be a social justice leader, credit to his focus on equity?

## **Research Method and Design**

In order to learn more about the traits and characteristics of a social justice superintendent, the researcher explored experiences, relationships, actions used to achieve equitable goals, and the politics of navigating a large urban district, while attempting to keep social justice at the forefront of every decision made by the superintendent. Therefore, the researcher followed a constructionist epistemology with a qualitative research case study approach. Constructionism, according to Crotty (1998), notes that “truth, or meaning, comes into existence in and out of our engagement with the realities in our world. There is no meaning without a mind. Meaning is not discovered but constructed” (p. 8). The constructionist epistemology lent itself to a grounded theory approach, which was used in this study. According to Creswell (2013), in a grounded theory approach:

The researcher focuses on a process or an action that has distinct steps or phases that occur over time...a grounded theory study has movement or some action that the researcher is attempting to explain...the researcher also seeks, in the end, to develop a theory of this process or action (p. 85).

It was expected that theoretical propositions would be derived through the analysis of the research and findings, and these processes and actions are what the researcher attempted to study and bring to light. Strauss and Corbin (1998) also describe grounded theory as “derived from data, systematically gathered and analyzed through the



research process...data collection, analysis, and eventual theory stand in close relationship to one another” (p. 12).

According to Strauss and Corbin (1998), qualitative research is "any type of research that produces findings not arrived at by statistical procedures or other means of quantification" (p. 10). Further, a case study approach is deemed appropriate for a "concentrated inquiry into a single case" (Stake, 1995, p. 136). Creswell (2013) defines a case study as "the study of a case within a real-life, contemporary context or setting" (p. 97). This case study allowed the researcher to examine the work of a superintendent, perceived to be a social justice leader, through an in-depth analysis of traits and actions that the superintendent embodied, and practices employed on a daily basis to promote equity for all students.

The strengths of the case study approach include the opportunity to closely study the subject over an extended period of time to look for patterns and trends that lead to a better understanding of the case. It also allows the researcher to "examine that case from which we feel we can learn the most" (Stake, 1995, p. 152). Stake further states "potential for learning is a different and sometimes superior criterion to representativeness" (1995, p. 152).

Therefore, the researcher was able to “concentrate on the one” (Stake, 1995, p. 135) and examine characteristics, “behaviors, certain features both within the system and outside” (Stake, 1995, p. 156). It is important to note that a single case study can be

"intrinsic" and "instrumental" depending on the specific intent of the research. For the purpose of this study, the guidelines of an intrinsic case study, as advanced by Stake, were followed. An intrinsic case study also allowed the researcher to gain unusual insight into an issue and focus on "the one most accessible, the one we can spend the most time with" (Stake, 1995, p. 158), as well as identify "characteristics of relevance" to the purpose of the study. According to Stake (1995), an intrinsic case study is when the researcher "wants a better understanding of this particular case. Here, it is not undertaken primarily because the case represents other cases or because it illustrates a particular trait or problem, but because, in all its particularity and ordinariness, the case itself is of interest" (p. 136).

### **Description of Participants**

Case studies require purposeful selection of participants. However, in intrinsic case studies, the participant is known. As Stake suggests, the study "begins with the case already identified (1995, p. 151). Therefore, the superintendent was perceived as a social justice leader by those that worked closely with the superintendent and recognized him as a social justice leader. The researcher used purposeful sampling to select the superintendent interviewed. The superintendent identified himself as a social justice leader, and others who worked closely with the superintendent recognized him as a social justice leader. Thus, the superintendent of a large urban school district, which serves a diverse student body, was the focus of this study. Documents listed on district and

organizational websites and acknowledgments by outside entities also pointed to this superintendent as a social justice leader through recognition of accomplishments in meeting the needs of every student through equitable means.

Also, other participants were purposefully selected to include "those informants through whom the case can be known" (Stake, 1995, p. 140). Therefore, two cabinet members, a board member, and three principals were asked to participate. The cabinet members selected were those that worked closely with the superintendent on a daily basis and could speak to the characteristics and traits they notice about the social justice superintendent who is the focus of this study. These cabinet members had been working in central office for at least three years. The principals were also purposefully selected, and they were familiar with the superintendent. They have worked in the district for at least three years and were from elementary, middle and high school. The board member served the district for at least two years. Therefore, a total of seven participants were interviewed.

### **Data Collection Protocols**

In a description of forms of data, Creswell (2013) states that "all forms might be grouped into four basic types of information: observations, interviews, documents, and audiovisual materials" (p. 157). Interviews, observations, and document analysis were all used to acquire robust data in order to discover the characteristics and traits of a social justice superintendent.

Interviewing participants involved multiple steps. The researcher had to decide on research questions that are open-ended. The researcher then decided whom it was that they would be interviewing. The type of interview was significant because it determined the quality of data the researcher would receive. Having an interview protocol was necessary so that there was consistency across the interviews. Following these procedures led to high-quality data that could later be used to find themes (Creswell, 2013).

Observations, Creswell (2013) states, are "the act of noting a phenomenon in the field setting through the five senses of the observer, often with an instrument, and recording it for a specific purpose" (p. 166). The observations were based on the research purpose and questions. A site to observe was selected, and permission was obtained. A protocol was also followed when observing in order to keep track of the data that was recorded. It was also important to record notes immediately after the observation, so the researcher did not forget what happened (Creswell, 2013). Given the researcher involvement, he was an active participant in many of the observations, as the researcher was involved in the day-to-day work with the superintendent being studied.

In order to confirm whether or not information gleaned from interviews was accurate, data from document analysis was necessary (Yin, 2009). A wide range of documents were reviewed, including board documents, meeting notes and minutes, and information published on the district website. These documents helped build a strong case that the superintendent being studied was a social justice leader, and they helped

bring to light information around the characteristics and traits that a social justice superintendent possesses.

When conducting document analysis, the researcher kept a journal and recorded their findings when analyzing the documents. Documents were found online and in person, and a protocol was in place in order to stay organized when analyzing so many pieces of data (Creswell, 2013).

A semi-structured interview protocol allowed for multiple questions to be formulated ahead of time, as well as follow-up open-ended probing questions to gather in-depth information (Gall, 2003) to provide a scaffold for the interviews. After a pilot test, the researcher decided on research questions answered in interviews and identified the interviewees that would be able to answer the questions best, based on purposeful sampling. One-on-one interviews were conducted to avoid hesitation from interviewees in a group setting. The interviews were recorded for accuracy and consent was obtained (Creswell, 2013).

### **Role of the Researcher**

The researcher was an observer in this study and participated in the activities being observed as the superintendent selected was from the district where the researcher was employed. While qualitative research involves the researcher coming in contact with the participants due to the need for interviews and observations, the goal was for participants being studied to act independently of the researcher as much as possible. The

researcher has experience as a school administrator and teacher, which must be noted. This background information allowed for better data analysis since the researcher understood the systems and structures of school organizations already.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

After approval from the committee, the researcher applied for IRB approval to study and observe human subjects. The researcher also applied to the school district in order to conduct research within the specific school district, and the researcher obtained consent from the subjects to use the information gleaned from the interviews and observations and ensured anonymity throughout the study.

A pilot testing process was used to check the validity and adequacy of the questions being asked. Initially, the questions used during interviews were developed by the researcher and were based on the research questions in this study. Initially, an administrator from a different district was interviewed to determine validity and reliability of the questions.

The researcher set up a 60-minute interview with each participant as the primary data source. These included the superintendent, cabinet members, board member and principals. Each person was interviewed once, and the superintendent was interviewed twice. One superintendent interview was completed before interviewing the other members, and one interview of the superintendent occurred after interviewing the other members. The purpose of a second interview with the superintendent was to ask any

clarifying questions after the initial interview and the interviews conducted with other members. Each participant answered one set of questions which were developed with the research questions in mind.

The researcher observed the superintendent in his daily job. He shadowed him during meetings with the community, board members, senior-level cabinet members, and school campus level administrators.

Documents, such as meeting notes and press releases from the district website and the city from where the district resides in were analyzed as well. The researcher also kept a field journal to document any other findings while studying the superintendent and other members.

### **Data Analysis Procedures**

Using the grounded theory approach, the researcher attempted to generate theoretical propositions for social justice leadership at the superintendent level based on the findings of this study. Straus and Corbin (1998) define grounded theory as, "theory that was derived from data, systematically gathered and analyzed through the research process" (p. 12). Interviews were transcribed, and coding was conducted using a system of note cards and organized coding on the researcher's computer. This allowed the researcher to code the transcriptions to look for trends and patterns in the responses. Creswell (2013) defines open coding as, "coding data for its major categories of information" (p. 86). Open coding was used to look for major themes in the responses

from the interviews and observations. Axial and selective coding was then used to narrow the themes and create a framework for social justice leadership at the superintendent level. Axial coding was conducted when the researcher identified one major theme or category from the open coding process and went back to the data to create more categories within this theme (Creswell, 2013). Selective coding was the final step and according to Creswell (2013) is "the final step in which the researcher takes the model and develops propositions that interrelate the categories in the model or assembles a story that describes the interrelationship of categories in the model." These themes within were used to format the discussion and findings of the study. Creswell (2013) states "qualitative researchers build their patterns, categories, and themes from the "bottom up," by organizing the data inductively into increasingly more abstract units of information" (p. 45). This allows for those themes to emerge from the research. Triangulation is defined by Yin (2009) as "the convergence of data collected from different sources, to determine the consistency of a find" (p. 241). Triangulation of the data from the interview guides, observations, document analysis, and a field journal were used to help formulate the theory by confirming validity through consistency of findings.

## **Summary**

Through a qualitative case study of a superintendent that was identified as a social justice leader, this study shed light on the characteristics and traits that a superintendent possesses that allowed him to lead with equity as a focus. Triangulation of the data



collected through interviews, observations and document analysis helped themes emerge that led the researcher to create a framework for social justice leadership at the superintendent level. The following chapters lay out the researcher's findings from this study.

## **Chapter IV: Findings**

School districts are becoming more diverse as access to public education has expanded to more citizens of the U.S. This requires an evolution in the skills and knowledge of the school district leader (the superintendent) to meet the diverse needs of these growing populations. The need to meet or address the increasing demands of a more diverse student population calls for school superintendents to embrace social justice leadership. According to previous research on school leadership, social justice leadership is necessary for K-12 school systems because it enables a school-to-disrupt the school-to-prison pipeline, addresses achievement gaps, and focuses on a student's background/culture as an asset instead of a deficit (Theoharis, 2009). The call for social justice leadership within the public-school system is forcing school and district leaders to focus on gaining knowledge and better understanding around equity to meet students' needs in an ever-changing, diverse school community.

The purpose of this study was to identify the traits and actions of a school district superintendent, perceived to be a social justice leader, and how he addresses equity. This qualitative case study was structured to answer the following questions:

1. What traits does a superintendent, perceived to be a social justice leader, embody to address equity in schools?
2. What actions does a superintendent, perceived to be a social justice leader, take to address equity in schools?

3. How does a superintendent, perceived to be a social justice leader, address equity in a school district?
4. What experiences does a superintendent, perceived to be a social justice leader, credit to his focus on equity?

The previous chapter described the methods and design to conduct a case study on the topic of social justice leadership at the superintendent level. Chapter four presents the findings from this study. This grounded theory qualitative case study used a combination of observations, interviews, and document analysis. Before presenting the findings of this study, the seven participants serving in differing capacities in one school district, represented by the pseudonym Urban District ISD, are described. Pseudonyms were applied to protect the identity of all participants and to promote trustworthiness. The school district focus of this study is also described. Participant profiles are followed by an analysis of the findings in the data and a summary of the chapter.

### **Description of District and Participants**

Seven participants took part in this study, including one superintendent, two district-level administrators, three campus principals, and one former school board member. A detailed description of the participants is limited for this study as the study focuses on the traits and actions of the school district superintendent and not on the other participants interviewed. A description of the superintendent and the district are provided, but the amount of information shared about both will be limited to anonymity as well.

**Urban District ISD.** Urban District ISD is a large, urban, public school district located in a central southern state. With over 80,000 students, Urban District ISD is one of the top eight largest districts in its state. According to the district website, its student body is a diverse group. More than 50 percent of the students in Urban District ISD are Hispanic, 7 percent are African-American, and 28 percent are white. Twenty-seven percent of the students are English Language Learners, meaning their native language is something other than English. Fifty-three percent of the student population is considered economically disadvantaged. More than 90 different languages are spoken by families in the district. The district website states that the district's schools are "comparable, if not superior to, the benchmarked cities of Denver, Phoenix, Raleigh-Durham and Seattle."

Urban District ISD has 130 schools and more than 11,000 employees. From this, 5,712 of the district employees are classroom teachers and 229 of the district's teachers are National Board certified, more than any other district in the state. Eighty-four of the schools serve elementary students, grades Pre-K to five; 19 schools serve middle school students, grades six to eight; and 17 schools serve high school students, grades nine through 12. The remaining schools are specialized campuses. Each campus has a head principal and a number of assistant principals, depending on the enrollment of the school. According to the district website, the vision of the district is to reinvent the urban school experience. The mission of the district is to provide a comprehensive educational experience that is high quality, challenging and inspires all students to make a positive

contribution to society. According to the website, the district's core beliefs are that all students will graduate college-, career- and life-ready; they will create an effective, agile and responsive organization; and they will create vibrant relationships critical for successful students and schools. The district values whole child, every child; physical, social, and emotional health and safety; equity, diversity and inclusion; high expectations for all students, employees, parents/guardians and community members; creativity, collaboration and innovation; community schools; and life-long learning.

The district has introduced several programs over the years, many of them starting under the guidance of the current superintendent. Some of these programs include Pre-K for 3-year-olds, full-day Pre-K for 4-year-olds, early college high school programs that enable high school students to earn their associate degree while graduating from high school, and the Career Launch program, which pairs high school kids with industry partners so they can learn the skills needed for current jobs and are guaranteed an internship after graduation. The district outperforms the state and nation when it comes to overall SAT and ACT scores. The district's students in grades four and eight outscore most districts across the nation on the NAEP assessment. The district currently has a graduation rate of 90.7 percent, the highest the district has ever achieved.

The district's organizational chart includes a school board of nine trustees; four chiefs, including teaching and learning, human resources, staff, and finance; an executive

director of communications and community engagement; general counsel; a technology officer of learning and systems; and others who report to these roles.

**Participants.** Seven participants were included in the study. From this, the primary participant was the superintendent of Urban District ISD. The following is a brief description of the participants.

*Superintendent of Urban District ISD.* He has been in this position for three years. Before that role, he held many different positions in districts throughout the state. He worked in multiple cities as a teacher, campus administrator, central office administrator, and superintendent in multiple cities throughout the central southern state. The superintendent taught in schools when desegregation orders were being enforced. The school districts he worked in at the time consisted of more than 90 percent Hispanic, students and almost 100 percent of the students were from low-income households. He also served as the deputy commissioner for dropout prevention for the state education agency. He has worked in education for more than 30 years.

His involvement in education goes beyond serving the school district and expands into the community. For example, the superintendent serves on many committees and organizational boards across the city, state and country. Many of these organizations focus on the education of urban school students and attempt to address inequities in the school systems. Most recently, he served as a co-chair on the mayor's task force to address institutional racism and systemic inequities.

The superintendent had a personal goal to earn a doctorate before he turned 30 years old. He graduated with a Ph.D. in educational leadership from a major university at the age of 29. In his doctoral program, he was a fellow in the superintendency program, a top program in the nation, which is designed to prepare future urban school superintendents. He holds a Bachelor of Science degree in education from the same major university, with a specialization in English, and a Master of Science degree in educational administration from another major university. The superintendent came from humble beginnings in the southern central state. Family is critical to him, and he shared stories about the longstanding traditions his family holds, many of which are popular in the Hispanic culture.

***Principal A.*** Principal A is an elementary school principal in Urban District ISD. She grew up in Malakoff, Texas. Principal A earned her undergraduate degree from the University of Texas at Arlington with a bachelor's degree in business administration and a minor in management. She earned her master's degree and principal certification in education administration from Concordia University in Austin, Texas. She has served as a campus-level administrator in Urban District ISD for nine years. Before that, she was a teacher in Urban District ISD. Her experience has been in Title I schools.

***Principal B.*** Principal B is a middle school principal in Urban District ISD. He earned his undergraduate degree from the University of Texas at Austin, majoring in English and political science. Principal B earned his master's degree at the University of

Texas Rio Grande Valley in education administration with a principal certification. He has served as a campus-level administrator in Urban District ISD for five years. Before working for Urban District ISD, he served as a principal and teacher in South Texas Title I schools. He grew up in Pharr, Texas in the Rio Grande Valley.

***Principal C.*** Principal C is a high school principal in Urban District ISD. She grew up in Athens, Texas. Principal C earned her undergraduate degree at Texas A&M University with a major in kinesiology and a minor in biology. She earned her master's degree and principal certification from the University of Texas at Austin in education leadership. This program focuses on educating students to become urban school district principals. She has served as a campus-level administrator in Urban District ISD for four years. Before that, she was a teacher in Urban District ISD. Her experience has been in Title I schools.

***District-Level Administrator A.*** District-Level Administrator A has worked in Urban District ISD for 14 years, three years in his current position. He earned his undergraduate degree from the University of Texas at Austin, majoring in political science, history and English. District-Level Administrator A earned his master's degree in education administration and his principal certification from the University of Texas Pan America in Edinburg, Texas. He was born in San Diego, CA, and went to high school in Corpus Christi, Texas. Before becoming a district-level administrator, he was a Title I



campus principal and held the position of high school associate superintendent in central office, which supervised all high school principals.

***District-Level Administrator B.*** District-Level Administrator B has worked in Urban District ISD for seven years. She earned her undergraduate degree from Colorado University in Boulder, Colorado. District-Level Administrator B earned her master's degree in urban policy with a concentration in public finance from New School University in New York City. Prior to working in Urban District ISD, she held district-level positions in other states, including Washington, D.C. District-Level Administrator B grew up in the Montbello neighborhood of Denver, Colorado and was bused out of her neighborhood school, without being asked, to a large white Jewish school, where she was the minority. District-Level Administrator B mentioned having a mother that worked four jobs and a father who was in prison.

***School Board Trustee.*** The school board trustee is a former school board member in Urban District ISD. He served as a school board trustee for two and a half years. He attended Austin Community College followed by St. Edward's University in Austin, Texas, where he earned his undergraduate degree in business administration. He also completed a Hispanic Executive Leadership Academy program at the University of Chicago Graduate School of Business. The trustee was born and raised in Austin, Texas. Prior to serving on the school board, he served on many district committees. He also was a staff member for a former mayor in the city where Urban District ISD is located.

## Results

The following sections explore the findings within the context of each research question. Major themes emerged from the data, and each major theme is defined with supporting information and underlying processes identified through the research. An analysis of the data collected throughout this study revealed specific traits and actions of a school district superintendent, perceived to be a social justice leader, and how he addresses equity.

*Question 1: What traits does a superintendent, perceived to be a social justice leader, embody to address equity in schools?*

Research Question 1 explicitly focused on the traits a superintendent, perceived to be a social justice leader, embodies to address equity in schools. For the purpose of this study, the term trait refers to a distinguishing characteristic or quality, specifically of one's personal nature. The traits that emerged from the data in this study revealed that a social justice superintendent is someone who is culturally competent, equity-driven and inclusive of all students.

**Culturally Competent.** When examining the traits a superintendent, perceived to be a social justice leader, embodies to address equity in schools, one major trait that emerged was that a social justice superintendent is culturally competent. For the purpose

of this research study, culturally competent refers to the superintendent's ability to recognize inequities in systems and strive for equitable solutions. To look for solutions to solve inequities within a school district, one has to first be able to identify those inequities. A culturally competent superintendent can recognize that individuals from different cultural backgrounds will have different levels of privilege and access to resources afforded to them. Being culturally competent means that one can easily identify the inequities in the system and do not equate a student's lack of success to a lack of effort.

The understanding that all students can be successful if afforded the same opportunities was mentioned by the superintendent throughout the interviews. He stated:

Administrators make decisions all the time. Whether it's a principal, a teacher leader, a superintendent, an associate, whatever. Your values and your guiding principles are going to be reflected in that decision making. So, it's really important to understand yourself. It's really important to have your own mental model of your own value system so that when decisions are being made in the way they are and when there's dialog occurring among an entire group, we're understanding where this fits in within decision making.

The superintendent discussed how he can analyze the current systems that are in place in the district and pinpoint what is keeping some students from being successful and what is enabling others to progress. As a result, he appears to be aware of institutional racism, which refers to racist practices that have become the norm within systems:

It's just when it surfaces, and it's so overt, it still makes me take a step back. But it's always a good reminder that that's what it is. That institutional racism that exists. Those are the systems that are created and are made up of people. So, when we talk about institutional racism, we're talking about us.

The superintendent is able to recognize the institutional racism still present within the urban district. By pinpointing inequities related to students' cultural background and needs, the superintendent is able to search for ways to overcome the existing racism:

But with institutional racism, social justice is something we strive for in our data, and everything is an outcome. I think it's significant; I think we as a city are trying to address that with the mayor's task force. But it is very strong, and it is there to protect the status quo. It is there to protect for economic reasons, leadership reasons, value reasons, whatever it is.

The superintendent's membership in a task force surfaced as an important avenue to address racism. According to district documents, the superintendent serves as a co-chair of a task force that was created by the mayor of the city to address institutional racism and systemic inequities within the city. The superintendent's embodiment of being culturally competent led the mayor to select the superintendent to co-chair this task force.

The superintendent highlighted one way that inequities exist within the district is in the differences in how students from different races and socioeconomic backgrounds are taught. He pointed out that high-poverty schools are often taught just to pass the state standardized tests:

I don't like it when high-poverty schools are being ... kids are just being taught how to answer the test, yet in other schools, kids are actually taught how to think, how to speak up, how to demonstrate confidence. And that's how accountability, through that particular term about state accountability, is very limiting and is actually a hindrance to social justice issues.

Being culturally competent led the superintendent to recognize that wealthier students were being taught to think more critically than lower-income students, who were being taught to pass a state standardized test.

The fact that the superintendent is culturally competent was reinforced by statements made by other participants in the study. One of the principals talked about seeing the superintendent as someone who is culturally competent when the superintendent pointed out to him that certain students were afforded opportunities that others are not:

I've traveled with him where we went to Harvard University, and we were part of that cohort where we discussed equity, and we talked about the differences of equity and equality and how the district could move forward to try to bring about some systemic change to better serve communities on the East side. Because he recognizes that there's a lot of opportunities that are afforded to other children on perhaps the West side that schools on the East side do not get to experience.

One of the district-level administrators also recognized that the superintendent had the ability to see that certain students were afforded more opportunities than others. She stated:

He feels like that's something that is especially damaging for kids of color. Because many times they don't have the resources in their families to really get the exposure to the other things. And so, he really feels that it's important for us to provide the equity, to kind of round out the other pieces.

The trustee mentioned that the superintendent instructed the district and the board to conduct an equity self-assessment. This was a study that analyzed the systems and current practices within the district to see if they were providing opportunities for all

students. This was not a required self-assessment, but the superintendent, being culturally competent, saw the need to highlight inequities in the school district. The trustee stated:

That was really important for me when I came on the board. It is what's moving forward, and having the district move forward with the equity self-assessment to look at some of these issues, but more importantly to develop a strategy moving forward. Then I think, as a result, the first phase of that was done with a double analysis, and that has also forced the district and the board to do some self-reflection, and really push us outside of our comfort level to really look at qualitative and quantitative data that shows the disparities in achieving that for students of color compared to white students. It was there, particularly for black students. We talked about the equity self-assessment and one of the things that we did as a board was we created this equity committee. The superintendent was willing to have that conversation. He didn't back away because, again, I think he knew and recognized that it was important to the board. But most importantly, he had very strong convictions about it as well.

**Equity-Driven.** When examining the traits a superintendent, perceived to be a social justice leader, embodies to address equity in schools, another trait that emerged was that a social justice superintendent is equity-driven. In this study, equity is defined as raising the academic achievement of all students while narrowing the gaps between the highest- and lowest-performing students and eliminating the racial predictability and disproportionality of which student groups occupy the highest and lowest achievement categories (Singleton and Linton, 2006). Equity-Driven refers to the superintendent's ability to keep all students at the forefront of the decisions he makes. And it also illustrates the superintendent's character around focusing on equity when making decisions for the district.

When reflecting on how to create a more equitable district and being driven by a need to see more equity throughout the district, the superintendent talked about focusing on closing achievement gaps between student groups. The district has historically had performance gaps between black and Hispanic students when compared to white students:

It is about eliminating the achievement gaps. Kids coming to school and enjoying their experience. That parents feel confident when their kids go to school. They drop their kids off at school and see them at the end of the day, that they feel confident in Urban District ISD and our public school system that we're doing right by them and by the families.

Being equity-driven and focused on the achievement gaps in the district was echoed by the principals in the study. One principal noted that the focus on equity through closing achievement gaps was very evident because it was discussed at principal meetings throughout the year. The superintendent was the one driving that conversation:

I feel like we always hear a lot about closing the achievement gaps, and this year, probably more than ever, there's been a push or a focus on it, where we are actually having to write plans, and you hear the board bring it up at almost every meeting. So, I think that that is something that's important and a goal for him.

According to one of the district-level administrators, the superintendent's focus on equity for all students created a bridge between communities that had been underserved for years. Being equity-driven, to them, meant the superintendent focused on the students that had been marginalized. His willingness to start initiatives within the district to address inequities and close achievement gaps was also acknowledged as being equity-

driven. For instance, My Brother's Keeper, a nationwide initiative that created programs specifically to serve black and Hispanic students, was highlighted:

I think, unique to him, is just the whole focus on equity and sort of looking at equity and really trying to meaningfully address it. He's done a lot with trying to get a plan for African-Americans. My Brother's Keeper and those type of things. I think that's why people see him as a bridge, a good sort of transition. I don't know what you'd call it, but he transcends racial things. I feel like he's interested in really serving all communities.

Being equity-driven also appears to mean recognition of inequities and highlighting the existence of those inequities to fix them. The superintendent talked about examining inequities in the system and not just highlighting them, but, more importantly, fixing them. He gave an example of a time when a parent discussed not being able to participate in their child's education because the school did not offer resources in their native language:

So just recently I was in a school where a parent said, "I don't do this because I really can't because nobody does it in the language that I understand." That's a social justice issue. Language issues. I have concerns with that. I thought we'd been past all that, but those things change, and they sort of move back again. Even though we think we've done these things over time, you still have new people change so much that it may not be there anymore. I think to get a true need around social justice, the leadership has to say, "It is not right to do things all in English and expect parents to be part or to even feel part of the improvement or even know what to do." That does not work, but the system itself has to say, "This must change" and then expect it.

Another district-level administrator indicated that the superintendent was equity-driven as he saw the need to provide high-quality programs to all students and not just those who are more privileged. Equity-related topics were discussed at planning meetings among the



superintendent's senior-level staff. Such a focus on equity was present at every level of the school district:

I know that the fact that all students having access to high-quality education is really important to him. I know that because he always keeps it front and foremost in our minds as we meet at different meetings at senior leadership. We're always centered and focused on our theory of action around our strategic priorities. He's always reminding us of all the importance of making sure that students have what they need to be successful. And I see that passion and commitment in him.

The school board trustee also acknowledged the superintendent as being equity-driven and that this was evident in the conversations between the superintendent and the board. According to the trustee, by keeping the discussions with the board centered on equity, the superintendent allowed the board to create policies that focused on ensuring all students were academically successful. As an equity-driven leader, the superintendent constantly reminds the board of the need to focus on equity:

We got into some very heavy conversations around policy, the direction of the strategic plan for the district, and he was very firm in that regard. So, I think he's been a good driver and navigator of that whole equity conversation.

**Inclusive of All Students.** When examining the traits a superintendent, perceived to be a social justice leader, embodies to address equity in schools, another trait that emerged was that a social justice superintendent is inclusive of all students. For the purpose of this research study, inclusive of all students refers to the superintendent's focus on district initiatives and goals that are open and available to all students, no matter their race, ethnicity, economic status, etc. A superintendent that is inclusive of all students has the characteristic of someone who believes that all students can be

successful and that all students deserve an equal life chance. According to the participants, when the superintendent and his staff talked about all students, it meant “all means all.” The superintendent described it this way:

Those are the things I want to change, and I want to do that for all. We say in our district, "All means all." That's a significant bar. It's a high bar, but it's important that we set a high bar for us. A value of respect. A value in terms of what I just said, it's about all means all. So, it's equity, high achievement for all students. A value of good will. Of doing things with a good intent to support kids or parents in our community. I always have to start from that, begin from that point. All means all truly, to me, means every single individual student must be successful. They must be like they're part of the family. Somebody knows them, somebody cares about them, and somebody knows their name.

One of the principals expanded on the superintendent’s focus on all students and being inclusive of everyone and mentioned the motto of “all means all” that is evident throughout the district and driven by the superintendent. The principal stated that in order for superintendents to be inclusive of all students, they have to be consistent in their message of inclusivity:

Well, I feel like his consistent use of “all means all” reflects that all students and families are important, and the ideas and values of all of the district community is important. I think that it's important for him, or it appears to be important to him, that we build meaningful partnerships with parents.

Another principal described a time when the superintendent was made aware of students at the principal’s school not being provided with opportunities that other students in wealthier schools were. When the principal told the superintendent about his students not being able to take choir, which would hinder their ability to get into some of the fine arts programs offered in high school, the superintendent made a change to ensure that the

program was inclusive of all students and that the opportunity was also available at all middle schools:

I know that when I first came in, one of the issues that I had is that our school didn't offer opportunities for our kids. For instance, to take choir. It wasn't offered. When I questioned him about that, I said, "I have families and children who've expressed wanting to go to a fine arts program or school. How will my kids ever get to have that opportunity if they don't have a program?" He was very quick to make sure that the following year, not only did I have the funds for a choir teacher, but he also questioned all the other Title I schools and made certain that if anyone was missing anything that they were being given opportunities to then hire somebody. With that respect, I know that his intent in leading this district is to provide opportunity for all children, not just people on the west side or people who are privileged.

According to a district-level administrator, the superintendent's ability to recognize that not all students were afforded the same opportunities and made sure that the district offered programs that were inclusive of all students. This participant shared that the superintendent noted that if the district were not inclusive of all students, it would have a negative effect on the families that had been historically underserved:

When he looks at them, all our kids, and he looks at the different hardships that they have, the different challenges they have, the different things that their families are going through, it's really important that we do something about that because he understands that when we don't get it right, kids, we impact families in a negative way.

Another district-level administrator echoed this sentiment when talking specifically about the dyslexia program in the district. Not every school had supports for students with dyslexia. The superintendent recognized that this was not a program that was inclusive of all students:

Because even the dyslexia stuff that we're doing. That's something that was important to him...including all kids. Making sure every kid that has a need is satisfied. In my mind, that's an equity issue because, you know, those kids couldn't access a curriculum without realizing that that's a need.

Similarly, the trustee referred to the superintendent as being inclusive of all students every time he had conversations with the board. Evidence of the superintendent being inclusive of all students was found in the discussions of serving all students and being committed to them as a district:

Well, what's so interesting is that when I came into the board, and then we started having conversations as a new board on issues around equity, and inclusion, and making sure that we take into consideration the needs of all of our kids, not just some, it's all. He says that "I talk about that all the time." I think that it's certainly been very important to him as a large urban school district, and with a very diverse student population that we serve. I think the superintendent is going to do a really good job in making sure that the needs of our kids, and students, and communities that we serve are being met. I think he's been very committed to that and continues to be very committed to that.

The previous examples illustrate that a superintendent perceived to be a social justice leader is culturally competent, equity-driven and inclusive of all students. Being able to recognize inequities in the district, being driven to address those inequities, and being inclusive of all students with a motto of "all means all" are traits that distinguish a superintendent who addresses equity in the district. It is apparent from the data that a social justice leader not only embodies key traits, but also carries out actions that truly focus on all students.

*Question 2: What actions does a superintendent, perceived to be a social justice leader, take to address equity in schools?*

Research Question 2 explicitly focused on the actions a superintendent, perceived to be a social justice leader, takes to address equity in schools. For the purpose of this study, the term action refers to what the superintendent directly does to achieve equity. The actions that emerged from the data revealed that a social justice superintendent manages forces, makes equitable organizational changes and makes courageous decisions.

**Managing Forces.** In examining the actions a superintendent, perceived to be a social justice leader, takes to address equity in schools, managing forces emerged. For the purpose of this research study, managing forces refers to the superintendent's ability to work through multiple barriers that keep students from being successful.

One of the forces the superintendent discussed having to address was that of the political environment encountered as an urban school district superintendent. The superintendent spoke about the fact that one's work in an organization as large as the urban district causes one to encounter individuals with different motives, and how those differences may become competing forces that block student success:

Another challenge is the political environment. The political environment, I think in any superintendency, but certainly in an urban school system is very complex. Just the political dynamics, the expectations of having such a large urban school

system with different needs, expectations and different starting points, that just...it's a challenge.

Expanding on the need to be able to navigate political forces, one of the principals shared that the superintendent was able to manage outside forces when it came to going for a \$1.05 billion bond. The district was in need of additional funding for facility repairs to improve some of the aging buildings with critical deficiencies. When trying to put together the bond package, the superintendent had to think about how to allocate funds to schools in need of repairs. He knew that if all the money went to one side of town, the other side would claim that they had been overlooked. He had to be strategic in how he formulated the final bond package to gain enough support for it to pass. As a participant recalled:

I think he recognizes that. He knows that, because there is this racial divide that exists in this city. It's not anything that he created, but it's something that he contends with. He recognizes that it's an issue and something that he needs to address. With the bond election, for instance, I saw evidence of this. He recognizes that you need to tread lightly. You can't move too much, too fast.

Similarly, one of the district-level administrators talked about the superintendent's ability to navigate the politics of working with adults who have their own agendas, and yet stay focused on what was important...the students. It is apparent that when managing forces that keep students from being successful, the superintendent relied on bringing in students' voices. He stated:

I really think that he tries to look to students to really add value to the conversation about equity and what the needs are. And you know, sometimes it's easy to get caught up in the politics and be adults. But, when you listen to the

students, it really makes it apparent what has to be done. And he does. He's very mindful of the need to really bring in student voices into these conversations. And I'm really just, based upon my own intuitions, how I see him demonstrating action and his commitment...I used to call him the James Brown of superintendents. I mean, he works so hard and tirelessly. And I think he does it to really get people to a goal. He tries to appease so many different folks with the goal of helping kids. And I know that's always front and foremost in terms of what he's trying to accomplish with any group that he's working with or whether it's with staff.

Relying on student voices was reinforced during an observation of the superintendent's student advisory roundtable. The superintendent would meet monthly with middle and high school students from throughout the district to hear their thoughts on certain topics. According to the superintendent, this was one way to manage forces that were preventing students from being successful.

Another district-level administrator discussed the superintendent managing forces when working with the school board. The superintendent and other participants from the study mentioned how the views of the individual school board members differed and how many times they were making suggestions that did not have the best interest of students at the center. When this would happen, the superintendent would bring it back to basic questions about student performance to manage the competing forces:

When we're in closed session with senior cabinet, he's very clear, like, "How is that going to erase achievement gap? I know you guys want to talk about that...that's great. How is that going to impact the achievement gap?" And he keeps bringing it back to that over and over and over again.

The school district trustee affirmed the superintendent's willingness to have difficult conversations with the board about the achievement gaps, even when not all members

wanted to address them. It appears from the data that having conversations with the board regarding the inequities that exist within the school district emphasizes the need to focus on equity, regardless of the board's diverse views. As the trustee shared:

Then putting together recommendations and strategies on how to deal with board challenges with the urban school district, the academic achievement gap. It's painful that you still have the large academic achievement gaps between black and white students in particular. Then comparing with all of the other issues that we have here, in the city, with affordability and what that means to the school district...losing students every year, about 1,000 kids per year for a while. Again, I think a really good part to that is that he has been willing to have those difficult conversations and stay firm in that regard. So, I think that's invaluable. We got into some very heavy conversations around policy...the direction of the strategic plan for the district. And he was very firm in that regard. So, I think he's been a good driver and navigator of that whole equity conversation.

**Making Equitable Organizational Changes.** In examining the actions a superintendent, perceived to be a social justice leader, takes to address equity in schools, making equitable organizational changes emerged as an important action. For the purpose of this research study, making equitable organizational changes refers to the superintendent making modifications to the larger organization to create more equitable outcomes for students.

The superintendent mentioned that before one is able to accomplish changes in the organizational structure or programs, one has to have a vision for where the district is heading. The creation of the vision allows the superintendent to highlight when the vision is not being realized and that organizational changes need to happen. One of the changes is the introduction of new programming to meet the needs of students:



For me, a reformist is sort of like taking everything that's been wrong and trying to change it, and I just don't think it works like that. I don't think humans change like that. It has been much more about new programming. It's more about what types of programs are necessary to educate our kids?

The superintendent expanded on the need to create equitable organizational change through new programming. This new programming had to be geared toward students who had been historically marginalized and had underperformed year after year. The superintendent also referred to the low graduation rates for boys of color and how introducing new and innovative programming into their schools helped raise the achievement level of the students and led to more students of color graduating:

First of all, it's about improving graduation rates. We have black students, black males at 65% graduation rates. Or we had schools at a 48% graduation rate, which is the longitudinal four-year grad rate. That's terrible. So, focusing on the graduation from the beginning has been extremely important, and that's been by individualized programming, new programming. That's what was happening with our early college high school.

The creation of the early college high school program is an example of a programmatic change that the superintendent introduced. Early college high schools are programs that allow students to earn two years of college credit while completing high school. The superintendent explained the importance of creating such a program in a low-income area of town to realize the potential of students that had been underperforming:

But when you provide kids an opportunity, and you pay tuition, and they're earning courses, and they earn up to 60 college credit hours or more, that to me is a game changer for kids and their families. Not just in going to college but also about employability. When I think about this one, there's been so many years where kids have always had the capacity to take these college courses and pass them, we just never gave them that opportunity.

One of the principals mentioned the superintendent making changes to the organization that lead to more equitable outcomes by the creation of a scorecard. This scorecard, which the superintendent referred to often during meetings, was created by the superintendent and his leadership team to be able to hold themselves accountable for student performance. If the scorecard indicators were not being met, then changes within the system were needed. As the principal stated:

We have very real achievement gaps, opportunity gaps, however you want to refer to them, between ethnicities, between students of poverty and not in poverty and ELL students. All of the traditional historic gaps are still existent. I feel the superintendent...and I go back to his scorecard, and what we are held accountable for...I think that has been much more pointed under his leadership. I think maybe before we just kind of talked about it, but I don't know that there was actually any change model put in place to try to combat that.

One of the district-level administrators also pointed out the changes the superintendent made in the district to accomplish equitable outcomes. Each of the changes to the organization had opposition from individuals who did not think they would work, but the superintendent introduced them because he knew these changes to the organization would lead to more equitable outcomes:

That's how he's focused on trying to change the culture of the organization. I mean, we can go down the list of all kinds of stuff. The expansion of our Pre-K program. The literacy plan. I mean, there's all kinds of things that are intended to go after equity. Expansion of SEL. The Pre-K through second ban on suspensions. The required recess policy. Those are all trying to erase achievement gaps but also attacking inequity as an issue. Those are all changes that when he and I would work together, that's how we are trying to push the system. And all those changes had huge critics. It wasn't like everyone was like, "Oh, my god, it's the greatest idea ever, let's do it." There was a lot of challenges to that.

**Making Courageous Decisions.** In examining the actions a superintendent, perceived to be a social justice leader, takes to address equity in schools, making courageous decisions emerged. For the purpose of this research study, courageous decision making refers to the superintendent deciding what might not be popular but what is necessary for equitable outcomes for students.

It appears from the data that making resolutions to address inequities that exist in the district is not easy. One has to be bold in one's stance in creating equitable outcomes for all students, and one has to be able to make difficult decisions. The superintendent shared that there would be uncomfortableness when talking about a vision of equity and that there is risk involved with that. But, the individuals within the organization need to hear it from the top:

Because right now, those I think fighting for social justice don't necessarily always have the power as a collective group in a collective impact situation. And so, there's risk there. That you might go too far out there. You're going to be looked upon as not doing what's right by a specific community.

The superintendent expanded on the need to be bold and brave in making decisions when introducing the topic of inequities within the system. He mentioned being attacked for bringing up the topic and focusing on all students. He talked about the need to be “stubborn” in courageous decision-making to get to more equitable outcomes for all students:

You have to be stubborn. You do, you have to, even in the face of unpopular stuff. And it's hard. It is hard. Especially when you're getting attacked at different levels and at different points or from different people who you don't even know.

Especially now with social media. It is about putting blinders on. It's about understanding the context, but it is about putting on blinders to say, "This is where we're heading," and finding enough people who will connect with you and not the others. Because when people throw darts with whatever they say, it's never the issue.

Courageous decision-making is also required in other district functions, including staffing. While some overlook poor performance because it is more difficult and uncomfortable to fire an employee who is not performing at the expected level, the superintendent in this study mentioned the need to be courageous around staffing decisions, particularly when it comes to individuals who are not helping all students succeed, year after year. As the superintendent explained:

The other thing is you move people out. Even though you may like somebody a lot, it's not about liking. It is about an outcome, and sometimes people just don't match the vision or the outcomes or expectations. Or some of them just don't work well with others, and so it runs a gamut of setting goals and expectations that are very specific to individuals, having discussions about it, coming through interim checks and trying to get an understanding if there's any type of cognitive dissonance there and seeing how to address it. It just can't be setting outcomes and then people don't reach it, and then you just look the other way and say, "Oh well, too bad." You have to act on those decisions.

One of the district-level administrators recognized the bravery it took for the superintendent to decide to focus on equitable outcomes for all students. He described a meeting with all principals and senior-level staff where the superintendent used the platform to highlight inequities and achievement gaps within the system and the need to address them:

That was brave. Attacking inequity. Just having that conversation. You could see the room when we had 500 administrators in the room. When he started talking

about equity and saying that this is one of our focuses that we need to look at equity in terms of eco dis, race, and ethnicity. And you saw the uncomfortableness in the room. It became uncomfortable for many administrators. But he still keeps pressing on it and knowing that those conversations have to happen.

Another district-level administrator also referred to the courageous decision-making taken by the superintendent to highlight inequities in the school district. She elaborated on the added level of courage it took to have those conversations as a Hispanic male in a city that is predominately white:

To take on the issues of equity, to take on the issues of race, and racial gaps, and achievement gaps when you have two Hispanics and an African-American at the three main positions in the district, that shows his leadership. But it's his leadership that's saying we need to move in this direction to do that. That's courageous in a city that has really never had that kind of ethnicity and color at this top level in this district.

The school board trustee also acknowledged the superintendent taking on the courageous decision to create a plan to specifically address the segregation of African-American and Hispanic students in the district. This desegregation plan was designed to address the longstanding segregation issues that have existed in the district. Many of the schools on the east side of the city have populations of African-American and Hispanic students that are over 90 percent of the total school population. While many schools on the west side of town are majority white. This segregation has existed forever, but the superintendent felt it was essential to create a plan that intentionally addressed that, which took courage. As he noted:

The board made a very bold decision to put together a desegregation plan, starting with District 1 schools. And so, the fact that the board and the superintendent were willing to have that conversation, and had actually put in the policy, I think it's very brave and very bold.

The previous actions serve as evidence of what a superintendent who is perceived to be a social justice leader carries out to meet the needs of all students. By being able to manage the forces that create barriers to student success, make changes to the organization that are equitable, and make decisions that are courageous, the superintendent intentionally strives to address equity in the district. In addition to the actions, how a superintendent, perceived to be a social justice leader addresses equity in schools was also a focus of this study.

*Question 3: How does a superintendent, perceived to be a social justice leader, address equity in a school district?*

Research Question 3 explicitly focused on how a superintendent, perceived to be a social justice leader, addresses equity in a school district. For the purpose of this study, this question focused on the larger strategies that the superintendent used to lead the district's attention to the equity needs and to provide the directions for the delivery of programs with potential to enhance all student academic achievement. The strategies that emerged from the data in this study revealed that a social justice superintendent addresses equity in the school district through relational leadership and a whole-child education.

**Relational Leadership.** In examining how a superintendent, perceived to be a social justice leader, addresses equity in a school district, one theme that emerged was that of relational leadership. For the purpose of this research study, relational leadership refers to the strategy the superintendent uses to be accessible to all district stakeholders, meet their needs and emphasize all students' achievement.

Relational leadership to achieve equity meant extensive conversations with district stakeholders. Keeping the line of communication open with individuals allowed building stronger relationships between the superintendent and community members. According to the superintendent, one has to start by communicating the vision one has for the students in the district and taking the time to help others understand where the district is headed and why it is headed in a particular direction. As he observed:

It's always about communication. Communicating the vision of the district. What are we really trying to do here? And making sure that our constituencies, whether internal or external, understand what it is and where we're headed. It's consistently having to go back and understand what we're doing. Why we're doing this. Why are these resources connected to these outcomes? What's prevented some things? You have to come back to the beginning consistently again and again and again. I have to come back and level set expectations and sort of think through it again. But it's always allowing more time to sit with folks and help them understand what we are trying to do and try to get some type of agreement.

It appears from the data that by being out in the community to hear from different community stakeholders, the superintendent is able to begin to hear about the areas that need to be addressed in the district, what is working and what is not working. Listening to

the community also allows the superintendent to relate to people, acknowledging their needs and contributions. As he noted:

One is consistently being out and visible in the community. I myself have to be doing more of that in schools. But being out in the community, consistently talking about the district and our expectations, recognizing the people for their great work, accentuating the positive. What is working? But also understanding that there are things that we aren't doing. And it's actually calling it out and so that people know that yes, we do want to recognize initiatives and people who are having a positive impact on student learning.

Relational leadership seems to be inclusive of families as well. A social justice superintendent is able to engage families as part of the decision-making process.

Engaging families promotes more buy-in, and by bringing them to the table, the superintendent can build a trusting relationship:

How are kids learning or not? How are kids progressing or not? The fairness factor is always important here. Decision-making with parents. Are parents being brought to the table or not? You at least express it in a respectful way so that people know that we're looking at everything and they're not forgotten. Because when we look at student achievement, it's not about the data and it's not just a data point.

One of the principals reiterated that the visibility and engagement from the superintendent led to a trusting relationship with the community. As a result, relational leadership leads to trust-building, which allows the superintendent to be better connected to those individuals who will be affected by the decisions. In this participant's words:

And I think that the superintendent has a unique way of reaching out and pulling in and kind of uniting folks. And so, I think that that's really what in my opinion got him the job. He kind of has this demeanor. He's calm, and he's eloquent, and he has a personality. He doesn't seem untouchable. And that I think is what really



people were looking for is somebody that really exudes those human qualities. I think that's what you're needing at that time. As what we still need.

Another principal mentioned the high level of approachability of the superintendent and how having an open line of communication allows him to learn about the concerns of stakeholders and to respond to those immediately. This is also true of communication between the superintendent and the principals:

I think that because he's very approachable, and I know that he is receptive to the needs of schools, I know that he's taking us in the direction of making certain that he spends more time listening to the needs of individual principals and schools. I see that's something that has changed. I think, previously, principals prior to his arrival, we didn't have direct access to the superintendent. It's just not something that we ever did. But I think that he's opened up the channel of communication.

Relational leadership seems to be practiced both inside and outside the school district.

For instance, the trustee discussed the power that he saw in the superintendent being open to attend community meetings outside of the district facilities. Such openness allows the superintendent to directly hear concerns from families and community members, but it also builds trust and a positive relationship between the superintendent and the community. He stated:

The fact that he was open to community conversations. He was the first superintendent to ever come to our community meeting. The fact that he saw the importance of working to regaining the trust in the community, and just being present. That he doesn't shy away from those things. And no matter how difficult the conversations may be...that he's willing to show up, I think that speaks volumes. He practices what he preaches.

**Whole-Child Education.** In examining how a superintendent, perceived to be a social justice leader, addresses equity in a school district, another theme that emerged was that of whole-child education. For the purpose of this research study, whole child education refers to a focus on the education of children beyond what is needed to pass a state assessment. It requires attention to the academic, psychological, emotional, and social needs of students. It also focuses on developing skills such as critical thinking, the ability to communicate better and how to collaborate. The social justice superintendent urged refocusing on the whole child for the entire district. This required a major shift in how to address equity in the schools. By refocusing on the whole child, the superintendent placed a major emphasis on the social and emotional learning and development of all students. As a result, the Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) initiative was implemented across the district. In his words:

We focus on social and emotional learning, where students can manage their emotions, and they can work with others, and problem-solve and make good decisions. Through social and emotional learning, I think we have evolved to a different level. And really, I've seen the work of it be so strong. That has really helped me understand how to work with struggling campuses in a much better way, whereas the orientation on that was a little bit different. That still guides me as a superintendent. Accountability is so driven by test scores at the state level and that's a problem because kids are so much more than a score. And I believe that as an educator, but I also believe that as a parent. That's very limiting.

One of the principals stated that the shift to a focus on whole-child led to equitable access for the development of skills that otherwise might not be developed in all students. SEL was not just an initiative that the superintendent dreamed up and never revisited, but it is

something that is embedded in the daily curriculum of every school in the district. The equitable access to the social and emotional development curriculum had a significant effect on students that are historically underserved. As another principal noted:

I think one of the things that is evident in the superintendent's leadership, from when he took over, they created the SEL Department. Having an administrator who's handling social and emotional learning and being cognizant of the needs of kids. And then having a whole department, not just a director, who's literally out there addressing the needs of schools. And they're coming out onto the campuses and they're providing guidance and activities. I think it's not just something that has been created and has been abandoned and forgotten. I think it's embedded very strongly and deeply into the systems that we have. That speaks to the need that we have not only in schools like mine, but primarily to essentially addressing the needs of kids and teachers. Because it's not just for kids.

Another principal spoke about the importance of the superintendent shifting the focus of the district toward a whole-child education and the effect it has on students of color.

When students feel safe to express themselves, and they feel they are cared for, they will perform at high levels. A focus on the whole child is what the superintendent wants for his own children and wants to provide it to every child in the district because he knows that not all students are getting this kind of education at home. As he reflected:

Going back to whole child, every child, I think that that's kind of his thing, I think that that's what's going to be his mark on this district. And not only talking about achievement gaps and airing out inequities and trying to combat those issues. But also, from the other side of that with social and emotional learning. Making sure that every student knows that they're cared for and that they're loved. You know, one of my favorite things that he's ever said is that a student will learn more for you than from you. And that is what I really think he believes. The success of all students is important to him. He says it. I mean, any time you get to hear him speak about all students, whole child every child. He's a family man. I think that he kind of wears it on his sleeve. So, you can tell he wants what's best for his own kids, the same way that he wants what's best for all kids.

One of the district-level administrators talked about the whole-child education approach in the district and how it has led the staff in the district to focus not solely on the standardized tests the students will take. When the test is the only thing that is focused on, African-American and Hispanic students are usually taught to pass the test. A shift from just teaching to the test to teaching to the whole child is something that is seen as a way to address inequities in the district:

I know for a fact that he really values the importance of kids being successful and feeling successful, based upon multiple measures that go beyond just standardized testing. I think that he fundamentally doesn't believe that teaching to test or just focusing on tests are going to be the things that ultimately are going to make our kids successful. And so, I think he wants to do the most impactful things for students. But also, he doesn't want to do things for students that are damaging. And I think, you know, without short of saying it, sort of the test taking mentality I don't think is something that I believe is something that he believes is what we should be doing for our kids.

The examples described above reflect evidence that a superintendent who is perceived to be a social justice leader addresses equity by two specific strategies; namely relational leadership and whole-child education. Finally, this study also explored the experiences that a superintendent, perceived to be a social justice leader, credits to his focus on equity.

*Question 4: What experiences does a superintendent, perceived to be a social justice leader, credit to his focus on equity?*

Research Question 4 focused specifically on the experiences a superintendent, perceived to be a social justice leader, credits to his focus on equity. The experiences that emerged from the data revealed that a social justice superintendent recognizes that both personal and professional experiences provided a solid foundation for his intentional efforts to serve all students.

**Personal Experiences.** In examining the experiences a superintendent, perceived to be a social justice leader, credits to his focus on equity, personal experiences emerged. For the purpose of this research study, personal experiences refer to individual and childhood events that influenced the superintendent's views on social justice and equity.

In reference to his upbringing and how it affected him to become a social justice leader, the superintendent spoke about his mother and her strength. For instance, growing up as an English language learner, his mother taught him to be proud of his Spanish language and to see it as a gift and not a deficit. The superintendent spoke about the situation when he was told that he needed to lose his Spanish language as a kid because it was seen as "low-class" compared to other languages like French:

But the good thing was, my mom was very fierce. My mom was a very protective mom, and she could go kick the butt out of anybody who did something wrong to us or said something wrong. And some very hurtful things were said as kids to all of my siblings. But she was on fire. But at least I knew I had that. So, I had that

fire there, so there was somebody I could always count on. But it's just having experienced that as a kid...either issues around racism or institutional racism, the language isn't far from that because that is what I hear people say. It's when somebody comes in with a Spanish accent, it's "low-class, lowlife, poverty and get rid of it, speak English." Somebody comes in with a French accent..."oh my gosh, it's cool. It's this, it's that." It's like, damn. It's just so wrong. It's so wrong.

Learning to be proud of his native language had a strong, lasting impression on the superintendent, to the extent that it influenced how he promoted policies and programs in the district. One example of such influence is his advocacy for dual language programs. Dual language programs teach students in their native language and in English so that they develop both languages at the same time. This is a shift from other bilingual programs that the district implemented in the past, which would strip the student's native language from them as they acquired the English language. As the superintendent reflected his childhood experiences and the value of developing a student's native language through a dual language program, he explained:

Dual language has been extremely important because of the value that having a second language that kids bring to the table. That many adults don't have. It's actually supporting kids and saying that is a good thing. Because not only is it a language that they know...that they can speak another language...it's also about their culture and it's about their background, and it's about their experiences, and it's the way they interact in their homes. When we tell a kid not to do that, we think it might be, "Just learn English." It really isn't. You're actually telling that kid that your culture, your background when you speak to your grandma, your grandpa, your aunt, your mom and your dad, that you shouldn't respect them because they don't know the language. Leadership has to say, "It is not right to do things all in English and expect parents to feel part of the improvement or even know what to do." That does not work. But the system itself has to say, "This must change." And then expect it.

The superintendent pointed out that it is a struggle to stay focused on issues of social justice because other individuals will see it as a threat to what they know and are used to. The superintendent's personal encounters with opposition from individuals in the organization have led him to become even stronger in his beliefs pertaining to equity and social justice. He spoke about social justice being in his DNA, and that it was due to the experiences he had gone through:

I don't think it's been easier. I think it's a fight every day, I don't think it's easier. I think the same stuff that I've dealt with as a first-year teacher in my classroom, are still some of the same challenges today. So, I don't know that it's gotten any easier. I think that I've become very familiar in the education world with it. You can't compromise your values and your beliefs. That absolutely goes against my DNA, and it goes against my being. Because that's who I am, I do believe in helping kids who have not done well, who historically have been underrepresented, underperformed. That is who I am.

One of the district-level administrators pointed out that the personal life experiences of the superintendent helped him get the job in his current district. According to this administrator, the superintendent's previous direct participation in and observations of events led him to believe in serving all students.

In addition, in the perception of this administrator, it was clear that, given the superintendent's experiences, he is able to relate to community members' struggles and concerns and better connect with them. As he stated:

I think the superintendent was chosen, one, because I think people recognize that he has a commitment and a passion to serve the students. And he certainly is someone that has worked overtime in the district to really strengthen the level of access students and families have to quality education. People perceive him to

understand what kind of things need to happen in a classroom more closely than many other superintendents.

Similarly, the trustee mentioned that the superintendent's personal experiences led him to better understand the issues that the board would face when taking on equity and social justice in the district. He acknowledged that the superintendent was able to prepare the board for the opposition they would face when discussing options to better serve students, because he had experienced that pushback personally. It was also apparent that the superintendent had to force the board to make tough decisions by highlighting the issues related to equity in public. By bringing equity issues to light, he was able to get the board to discuss topics that they might not feel comfortable discussing but that were necessary to discuss. As the trustee noted:

He has been willing to have those difficult conversations and stay firm in that regard. The superintendent is also willing to bring forth recommendations of every member. He would tell me and the board that this is what we want to do, that we need to get ready because he is going to bring them forward, and that means we're going to be forced with making difficult decisions. But the fact that he was willing to go there, I think, speaks that it was important to him personally as well. I think he's done a good job. He needs to stay away from the board politics as much as possible, but also stay true to his convictions. And that means often having to tell board members no. That's not easy.

**Professional Experiences.** In examining the experiences a superintendent, perceived to be a social justice leader, credits to his focus on equity, another theme that surfaced was professional experiences. For the purpose of this research study, professional experiences refers to the events in the field of education that shaped the superintendent's views on social justice and equity.



Starting with his experience as a teacher in a southern-central state, the superintendent pointed out how such experiences shaped who he is as a social justice leader today. He chose to work in schools with high poverty rates because he wanted to make a difference. Working as a teacher in diverse urban schools also led him to want to continue to work in districts with high levels of poverty because he feels he can have a more significant impact there:

That's where I wanted to do my work. In an urban school system, a lot of minority kids, high poverty, and concentrations of poverty. To make a difference. To me social justice is doing right by all students. There's a social justice there. But specifically, for kids who have been historically underserved. And then that still goes back to even my start as a teacher. I wanted to work there for a specific reason, and 31 years later I'm still doing that very same thing. That still has not changed over time. Even as a teacher working in an urban system, all Hispanic, 98% poverty, even working in another district of superintendency with again 98% Hispanic with 92% poverty along the Mexico border, that is me. That has been my thing since forever. So, it started with me as a teacher. And regardless of what I've done, to me, that's always been the thing...about all means all.

The superintendent also recalled how attending a university-based superintendent preparation program that focused on the urban school district superintendency was instrumental in his career. This helped prepare him for the challenges he would face working in a district in an urban setting:

My studies were around the urban superintendency. So actually, I went to school to learn more about the urban superintendency. It not only had been an area of interest; it had been an area of practice, as a teacher and also as an administrator on the campus level.

The superintendent also talked about how being a minority superintendent influenced his actions. He is the first Hispanic superintendent in the history of the school

district. While this was an accomplishment he was proud of, it was not easy. He talked about having to deal with people thinking that just because he is Hispanic, he was only going to focus on the achievement of Hispanic students. He countered that thought by pointing out that for years, when there were white superintendents, no one ever questioned whether they were only going to look out for students who looked like them. This professional experience helped shape him to be a better social justice leader and learn to ignore such comments:

I think other implications are being a minority superintendent, a Hispanic superintendent. When I was actually going through this, 96% of all superintendents were white males when I started out, to now. It's still about the same. So, there's been a lot of talk about diversity and this and that and the other, but those are just other issues that come up when you raise the issue around student achievement and performance. It's almost like it's a bigger backlash because of concerns that I will only fight for one group and not the entire district's and things like that. Those are some sensitivities around some of those areas. What's also interesting is I sat around at the executive level for many years I was the only Hispanic, but nobody said boo about it. So, nobody says anything, I mean, I could see it, but I thought, hey it is what it is, it's nothing different, it's nothing different from where I've grown up.

The trustee reiterated the importance of having a Hispanic person in the top leadership position of the district. He explained how Hispanic students are able to see a Hispanic person in charge of the district, and the effect that has on their ability to see themselves as leaders, too:

In the 134 years of this school district, he's the first Hispanic to serve as a superintendent for the school district. And so, I think that given the student population, families that we serve, I think it's really important for students to see people in leadership positions that look like them, so that they can aspire to one day perhaps pursue positions like that.

The superintendent also pointed out that his years of professional experience as an educator led him to know where he stands on topics such as education reform. He explained that education reform has been a hot topic for the past decade, as people in the field of education talk about “disrupting” traditional education to get different results. Based on this experience, the superintendent realized that reform is not the answer when looking at how to best serve students of color:

I'm not a reformist, as a category of what is sort of nationally known as a reformist. Because that's just not me. I think I'm smarter than that. If I didn't know anything about education or instruction, I'd be probably come in as a reformist. But I think I know more, just from when I've started. This is my 31st year in education...through desegregation, just very institutional federal law, racism and things like that. I just learned. It is very complex in that it's dynamic and it's tough to understand it. You really have to sort of live in it to understand.

One of the principals pointed out that the superintendent's professional experience as an educator has helped him better lead the district toward more equitable outcomes for kids. When the superintendent has tough conversations about equity with the principals in the district, it helps that he has served as a teacher and principal in urban schools, which leads to a higher level of trust. In this principal's words:

I think that everybody can kind of see straight through a politician as a superintendent. I do not believe that we have that in this district. I think that the superintendent is an educator. And so, I think that is really what it comes down to...is the reason that folks in this district trust him is because we know that he came from the classroom, he understands what it's like, he keeps kids at the forefront, and he's willing to take the heat in political arenas. And so that's my biggest appreciation is that we actually have a real educator leading the pack.

The trustee reinforced the principal's comments related to how important it is having a superintendent with professional experience as a teacher and principal in similar school settings. This professional experience as an educator helped him lead the district toward more equitable outcomes for students, because the administrators in the district trust him:

I think the value and experience that he brings to this position as superintendent, because he was a former school teacher, former administrator, principal, and then in the administration I think he had brought with him that experience and perspective, so that, I think, made him, in my opinion, the best candidate for superintendent position.

The previous examples serve as evidence that a superintendent who is perceived to be a social justice leader credits personal and professional experiences to develop a strong focus on equity.

## **Summary**

Chapter four included findings from a qualitative grounded theory case study and explored the findings within the context of each research question. An analysis of the data collected throughout this study revealed major themes when looking at the traits and actions of a school district superintendent, perceived to be a social justice leader, and how he addresses equity. Data from observations, interviews, and documents were analyzed to identify major themes. Each major theme was defined with supporting information and underlying processes identified through the research.

The data revealed that a superintendent, perceived to be a social justice leader, is someone who is culturally competent, equity-driven and inclusive of all students. The

actions such a leader carries out to meet the needs of all students include managing forces, making equitable organizational changes, and making courageous decisions. Further, two specific strategies that such a superintendent employs are relational leadership and a whole-child education. Lastly, the social justice superintendent credits personal and professional experiences in the development of his focus on equity.

Chapter five provides a brief background of the study, summarize the findings within the context of prior research, and provides implications for practice and further inquiry.

## **Chapter V: Findings, Implications, and Recommendations**

Chapter five presents the findings, conclusion, implications, and recommendations of this study. In addition, a conceptual framework is offered. This was derived to connect the emerging themes that illustrate a perceived social justice superintendent's understanding, beliefs and actions to ensure equity in the district. This chapter offers a summarized account of the study, including a brief background of the study, an emergent conceptual framework and implications for practice and further inquiry.

### **Brief Background of the Study**

The student demographics of school districts have changed over time. School districts are becoming more diverse as access to public education has expanded to more citizens of the U.S. Such an increase in diversity prompted an evolution in the skills and knowledge of the school district leader (the superintendent) to meet the diverse needs of these growing populations. Meeting or addressing the increasing demands of a more diverse student population calls for school superintendents to embrace social justice leadership. The call for social justice leadership within the public school system is forcing school and district leaders to focus on gaining knowledge and better understanding of equity to meet students' needs in an ever-changing, diverse school community.

**Statement of the Problem.** As student demographics in urban school districts become increasingly diverse, social justice leadership in the K-12 setting is necessary to meet the needs of all students. Much has been written about social justice leadership at the school principal level (Theoharis, 2009; Vogel, 2011). Researchers have noticed that a principal who embraces social justice leadership exhibits specific characteristics, skills, knowledge, and understanding of the needs of all students, and how administrators and teachers carry out social justice at the campus level (Affolter and Hoffman, 2015; Kemp-Graham, 2014). However, most of the research related to social justice leadership has focused on campus-level leadership, in particular, the principal (Kose, 2007; Miller, 2013). Therefore, there was a need to further explore social justice leadership at the superintendent level, with a specific focus on equity and access for all students.

**Purpose of the Study and Research Questions.** The purpose of this study was to identify the traits and actions of a school district superintendent, perceived to be a social justice leader, and how he addresses equity. The qualitative case study answered the following questions:

1. What traits does a superintendent, perceived to be a social justice leader, embody to address equity in schools?
2. What actions does a superintendent, perceived to be a social justice leader, take to address equity in schools?

3. How does a superintendent, perceived to be a social justice leader, address equity in a school district?
4. What experiences does a superintendent, perceived to be a social justice leader, credit to his focus on equity?

**Brief Overview of Methodology.** A qualitative approach with an intrinsic case study design was used to identify and analyze the common characteristics, traits, and decisions of a social justice superintendent who provides equity and equitable outcomes for all students (Stake, 2003). Through purposeful selection, participants were asked to be included in the study. These participants included the superintendent, cabinet members, a board member, and campus administrators representing elementary, middle, and high schools. The researcher used three key sources for data collection. These included semi-structured interviews with participants, observations of relevant events and activities, and district documentation about the superintendent's leadership. Data were collected, coded, and categorized following an inductive process (Denzin and Lincoln, 2003). The use of multiple sources of data allowed for the triangulation of that data. The intent was to develop emerging themes that surfaced from the data analysis.

### **Summary of Findings**

This study uncovered the traits and actions of a superintendent, perceived to be a social justice leader, and how he addresses equity. Though some researchers have studied the traits and actions of a social justice leader at the principal level, not much has been



written on the superintendent as a social justice leader. The findings from this study sustain previous research on social justice superintendents and advance new understanding on the traits, actions, strategies, and experiences of a social justice leader.

**Social Justice Superintendent Traits.** Findings suggest that a superintendent, perceived to be a social justice leader, embodies at least three distinguishing characteristics or qualities, specifically related to the superintendent's personal nature. The traits that emerged from the data revealed that a social justice superintendent is someone who is culturally competent, equity-driven, and inclusive of all students.

***Culturally competent.*** Culturally competent refers to the superintendent's ability to recognize inequities in systems and strive for equitable solutions to address the needs of all students, regardless of socioeconomic or cultural background. Findings also suggest that a culturally competent superintendent believes that all students can learn at the highest level, but specific factors keep some students from being able to attain the highest level of success.

Research supports that for leaders to make systemic change for marginalized students, they must first understand their own biases, acknowledge their own deficit thinking, and engage in ongoing critical reflection of their beliefs of oppression and social justice, thus becoming aware of the cultural influences in school settings and their own biases that perpetuate the inequitable practices within schools (Kemp-Graham, 2014). While previous research has pointed to the need for cultural competency at the

principal level, the findings from this study illuminate that cultural competency is necessary at the superintendent level as well. A culturally competent superintendent can recognize that individuals from different backgrounds will have different levels of privilege and access to resources. Being culturally competent means being able to easily spot the inequities in the system and not equating a student's lack of success to a lack of effort, but rather to other forces that are keeping the student from being able to perform at maximum potential.

***Equity-driven.*** According to researchers, equity aims to raise academic success for all students and to reduce achievement gaps (Singleton and Linton, 2006). This study reinforces such a notion as it was found that the superintendent is highly focused on equity and keeps it at the forefront of the decisions he makes. While cultural competency refers to the superintendent's ability to recognize inequities, being equity-driven refers to the superintendent's character of focusing on equitable outcomes when making decisions for the district. This supports the need for preparation before ascending to a leadership position. As previous research suggests, preparation programs seeking to develop leaders for social justice must help aspiring school leaders build awareness of how systemic inequities manifest in schools and how social justice work can begin to redress these issues (Guerra et al., 2013). Previous research also states that educators for social justice must attune themselves to, and become experts on, the range of student differences and

their intersections (Capper, et al., 2014). This will prepare them to make decisions for the school system that are equity-focused.

The findings from this study are congruent with prior research pertaining to social justice leadership at the superintendent level that highlights the need for superintendents to focus not only on accountability measures and achieving the highest test scores, but also on whether the practices they apply in the district are socially just (Kelley, 2016). An equity-driven social justice superintendent can identify the gaps in achievement and opportunities for kids and is driven to act to raise academic success for all, and “all means all.”

***Inclusive of all students.*** Being inclusive of all students refers to the superintendent’s intentional focus on district initiatives and goals that are open to all students, no matter their race, ethnicity, economic status, etc.

This finding is aligned with the research on social justice leadership at the principal level. Prior research claims that social justice leaders keep all students in mind as they create opportunities for marginalized populations to have access to rigorous academic opportunities that increase learning time and improve the accountability for the achievement of all students (Theoharis, 2009).

While previous research suggests that there is a need for principals to be inclusive of all students (DeMatthews, 2015), the findings from this study advance the notion that a superintendent must also be inclusive of all students and embrace the belief that all

students can be successful and that all students deserve an equal life chance. A social justice superintendent who is inclusive of all students knows that "all means all" and searches for ways to make sure that all students are successful. Further, social justice superintendents are continually reminding themselves that serving all students means that specific groups that might have been overlooked in the past are not ignored moving forward.

**Social Justice Superintendent Actions.** Findings revealed that a superintendent, perceived to be a social justice leader, carries out specific actions to achieve equity in schools. Actions refer to what the superintendent does himself directly to achieve equity. The actions that emerged from the data in this study revealed that a social justice superintendent manages forces, makes equitable organizational changes, and makes courageous decisions.

***Managing forces.*** According to the findings, a social justice superintendent must manage adverse, and at times conflicting forces. Managing forces refers to the superintendent's ability to work through multiple barriers that keep kids from being successful. Further, the findings of this study revealed that a social justice superintendent has to be able to strategically navigate the politics of working in a large urban district to make sure that equitable outcomes for students are achievable. This supports previous research suggesting that social justice leaders also have a tenacious commitment to justice that allows them to not back down in the face of adversity, and that leading for

social justice incites political unrest because the hegemonic culture will resist change that provides equity to all members of society (Garza, 2008).

While previous research has concluded that social justice leaders at the principal level have to be able to manage external and internal forces that keep all students from being successful (Theoharis, 2009), the findings from this study illuminate that such action applies to social justice superintendents as well. The social justice superintendent has to identify the internal and external forces throughout the district that are keeping all students from being successful. Managing those forces means the social justice superintendent tackles those forces head-on and determines how to not let them derail the equity work happening in the district.

***Making equitable organizational changes.*** Equitable organizational changes refer to the superintendent making modifications to the larger organization to create more equitable outcomes for students. This study reinforces the notion that as leaders make equitable organizational changes they must also critically reflect on these, and other similar data to propose and design an agenda of reform whose focus is to rid the system, writ large, of policies and practices that lead to these shameful discriminatory results (Gooden, et al., 2012). Others also note that district leaders need to be overt in their commitment to social justice in their schools, which is demonstrated in their actions, their policies, their budgets, their guidance of school boards, and in their support for principals (Affolter and Hoffman, 2015).

This study reinforces that a social justice superintendent is a leader who is willing to make structural changes in the system to get equitable outcomes for students. To this end, a social justice superintendent uses data to highlight inequities, and then introduces new ideas and programs that will address those inequities. For instance, the superintendent in this study placed the data on a “scorecard,” with measurable goals, so that he and his team could make changes in the organization with the intent of reaching the set goals.

***Making courageous decisions.*** According to the findings, a social justice superintendent makes courageous decisions that might not be popular but are necessary to achieve equity in all schools. This is congruent with previous research at the principal level in that a social justice leader exhibits courageous decision-making and challenges the status quo because he is confident that it is right, having witnessed the inequities (Garza, 2008). Although previous research focused on the principal as a social justice leader, this study advances the idea that a social justice superintendent also engages in courageous decisions to accomplish equity in the school system. When a social justice superintendent introduces a vision and plans to eliminate inequities in the district, not everyone within the system might be in favor of that decision. Thus, a social justice superintendent has to be courageous to recognize the need to make difficult decisions.

According to the findings, courageous decision-making goes beyond curriculum and programmatic aspects. It also involves staffing decisions that are not always popular,

whether it be letting individuals go because they are not working to achieve equitable outcomes for students or hiring people who are competent and embrace an equity philosophy. Courageous decision-making also means that a social justice superintendent holds difficult conversations about race and how certain practices are, in fact, racist. This study advances the notion that courageous decision-making is essential for a social justice superintendent.

### **Strategies Used by Social Justice Superintendents to Address Equity.**

Strategies in this study related to carefully thought-out plans or methods employed to specifically achieve social justice across the district, as opposed to actions individually carried out by the superintendent. Findings revealed that a social justice superintendent addresses equity in the school district through relational leadership and whole-child education.

***Relational leadership.*** According to this study's findings, a social justice superintendent is intentional in connecting and building relationships with all stakeholders. Further, communication is an essential component of relational leadership. Such communication enables the superintendent to reiterate the vision of the district and to hear from key stakeholders. This echoes prior research in that social justice leaders connect with the community and make a point to reach out to groups that have traditionally been marginalized (DeMatthews, et al., 2015).

Further, as prior research on relational leadership suggests, before a community can play a role in shaping school policies, there needs to be a community-wide vision for education that articulates why education is important to the community and what they are willing to do to ensure it (Horsford, 2010).

This study advances the construct that a social justice superintendent should rely on relational leadership in order to engage parents and key stakeholders as part of the decision-making process. With community buy-in comes greater accountability, which will lead to a greater focus on equity.

***Whole-child education.*** Another strategy that surfaced in this study relates to “whole-child education.” This suggests that to achieve equity in schools, the district must shift attention from minimum expectations to pass a test to meet the academic, emotional, psychological, and social needs of every child.

Prior research on social justice leadership of the principal (Hernandez, et al., 2014) notes that the emphasis should go beyond passing standardized tests. The present study advances the notion that a social justice superintendent must also introduce a whole child education throughout the district to address equity in all schools.

The social justice superintendent in this study introduced programs in every school to develop students’ social and emotional learning skills. This study highlights the need for a social justice superintendent to shift the focus of the district away from just preparing students for a standardized state test and toward beginning to develop other



skills in students as well. Whole-child development is often absent from schools with high poverty and high percentages of children of color. The social justice superintendent in this study made it a district priority for every student.

**Experiences That Lead to a Focus on Equity.** Findings revealed that certain experiences promote a social justice leader to embrace equity. The experiences that emerged from findings in this study include personal and professional experiences.

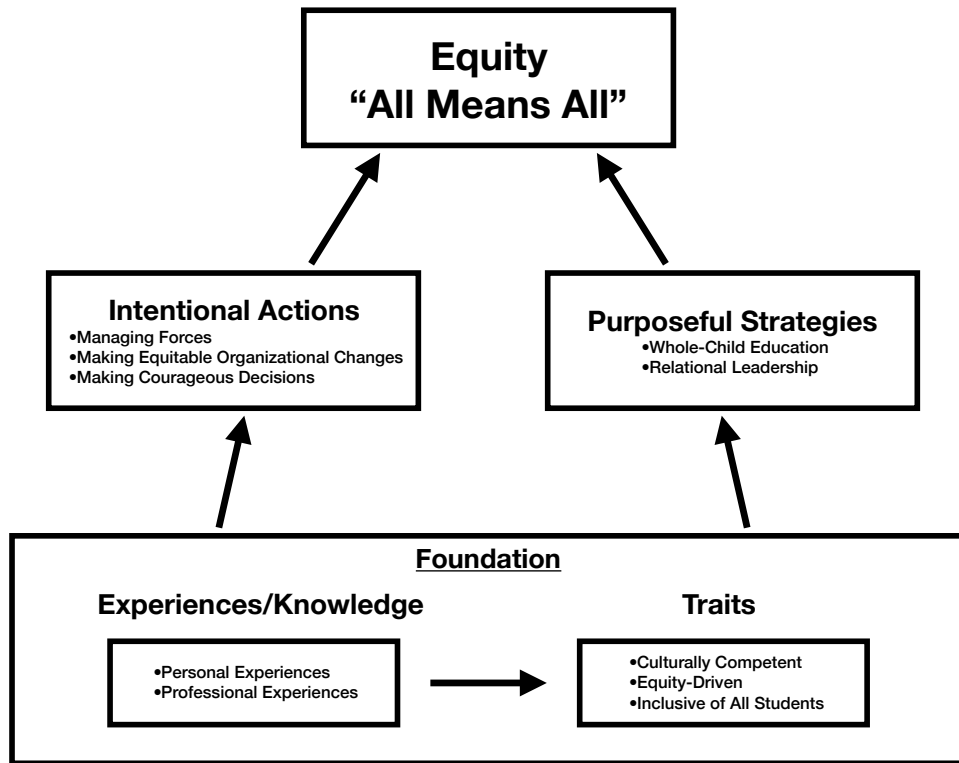
***Personal experiences.*** The personal experiences include childhood events and family members, such as parents, who instill the value of a leader's background and promote pride for their own heritage and native language. As a result, a social justice superintendent intentionally creates and supports programs such as dual language, which encourages students to be biliterate, bilingual and bicultural, so as to honor students' culture and background. Thus, this study advances the notion that a leader's personal experiences play a key role in shaping his vision and beliefs to ensure all students are successful.

***Professional experiences.*** Findings also revealed that a social justice superintendent's focus on equity is shaped by professional experiences throughout his career. Such experiences may include teaching, previous leadership at the campus level, and previous leadership at the district level. From this, leading a district that is high poverty and majority-minority helps develop a motivation to serve students with high needs. The social justice superintendent's professional experience also includes

professional preparation afforded by graduate schools focused on the urban school district superintendency, coupled with experience in urban school district settings. These cumulative experiences lead to an understanding of what is best for students and achieve equitable outcomes.

This finding is congruent with research focused on social justice leadership at the principal level, which highlighted the role that professional experience plays and referred to the need for social justice leaders to have background knowledge when it comes to the ability to see inequities within a school system and make changes to eliminate the inequities (Theoharis, 2009). While this research reinforces the benefits that professional experiences have on being a social justice leader, this study also advances the idea that a social justice superintendent's personal experiences lead to a focus on equity.

As stated elsewhere, this study followed a grounded theory approach. According to Straus and Corbin (1998), this approach refers to a "theory that was derived from data, systematically gathered and analyzed through the research process." Thus, taking the findings of this study, the researcher attempted to generate theoretical propositions for social justice leadership at the superintendent level. Figure 2 offers a graphic illustration of an emerging framework, including the traits, actions, strategies, and experiences that a social justice superintendent exemplifies when leading for equity.



**Figure 2.** Hill Social Justice Superintendent Framework

Further, given the nature of this study, the following propositions are advanced:

1. A superintendent who is considered a social justice leader may be distinguished by specific traits, such as being culturally competent, equity-driven, and inclusive of all students.
2. A superintendent who is considered a social justice leader purposefully takes specific actions such as managing forces, making equitable organizational changes and making courageous decisions.

3. A superintendent who is considered a social justice leader is intentional in implementing specific strategies such relational leadership and a whole-child education.
4. A superintendent who is considered a social justice leader credits specific personal and professional experiences to his focus on equity.

### **Implications for Practice**

The findings of this study contribute to the knowledge base about the social justice leadership of superintendents. Specifically, this study generated information that might be useful at the district level. Thus, the following recommendations for practice are offered:

1. School district superintendents who are in search of ways to address equity in their districts can draw from the findings of this study to focus on areas of self-growth. Identifying specific areas and addressing them can lead practicing superintendents to become more socially just.
2. School district human resource departments and school boards can use the findings of this study to identify key traits, actions, strategies, and experiences as illustrated by a social justice superintendent. In addition, the findings of this study could be included as interview questions in selecting a candidate who is a social justice leader.

3. Superintendent preparation programs may consider the actions and strategies of this study when developing preparation standards that focus on equity and high academic achievement for all students. Similarly, given the need for superintendents to focus on equity and social justice for all students, superintendent preparation programs could develop a social justice curriculum to better prepare future superintendents who strive to achieve equity in all schools.

### **Suggestions for Further Inquiry**

This study was conducted as a single case study. As such, it only focused on one Hispanic superintendent, perceived to be a social justice leader, and only a few informants familiar with the case, and in leadership roles, were included. Further, this study was completed in a large urban school district located in a south central state. Consequently, their perceptions cannot be representative of all districts. Therefore, additional inquiry could:

1. Expand the number of participants and include interviews with teachers, parents and other community members. Such a follow-up study may confirm, or refute the findings reported in this study.
2. Others may replicate this research in districts of different size and student populations.
3. Researchers may also focus on suburban or rural school districts.

## **Appendix A**

### **Interview Protocol – Superintendent**

1. Please describe your work as an educator prior to becoming a superintendent.
  - a) What roles did you have?
  - b) What was your school/district like in those roles?
  - c) Why did you desire to enter into district leadership as a superintendent?
2. Please tell me why you wanted to become superintendent in your specific district.
  - a) What are some of the challenges you have faced?
  - b) How would you describe teacher and administrator expectations for students before you entered?
  - c) What do you want to change as the district's leader?
3. Please describe your personal core values that guide your work as superintendent.
  - a) Why do you believe your \_\_\_\_\_ belief - is so important to your work?
  - b) How do your core values influence your work?
4. What are the key aspects of your practice as a superintendent? How do you find you spend your time in this work?
5. How would you describe your theory of action – or what you intend to do as superintendent and how/why?
6. How did you set your reform agenda?
  - a) What were the indicators you examined?
  - b) Who was involved in this process?
7. What would others say you stand for? How do you know?
8. How do you understand social justice in schools?
9. Please tell me about the social justice issues that are particular to your school district.
10. How does your leadership practice address social justice in your district?  
(personal value, leadership practice, district vision)
11. How do you describe the superintendent's role in improving student achievement?

12. Could you please describe some of your major initiatives as superintendent?
- a) Why are these issues important to you?
  - b) How do you work to tackle the inequities? What are the important pieces of this work—accountability, implementing best practices, collaboration, etc.?
  - c) How do you balance urgency with implementing your reforms?
13. How did you communicate the importance of these issues to your constituents?

## **Appendix B**

### **Interview Protocol – District Level Administrator**

1. Please tell me a little about your affiliation with Urban District ISD. How long have you been here/in what roles have you served?
2. Why do you feel that Dr.\_\_\_\_ was chosen as superintendent of Urban District ISD?
3. Could you tell me what you feel he stands for – what is important to him? How do you know?
4. How would you describe his theory of action – or what he intends to do as superintendent?
5. What are some of changes you've seen in the district since Dr.\_\_\_\_ became superintendent?
6. What, if any, are some of the district inequities that you feel still exists? How do you talk about this work as a member of his leadership team?
7. What are the most pressing issues you focus on as a leadership team? How often and how do you discuss these issues?
8. Please tell me about the social justice/equity issues that are particular to the school district.
9. How does Dr.\_\_\_\_ leadership practice address social justice/equity in the district?
10. What are some of the key strategies/initiatives of Dr.\_\_\_\_ tenure? What is your role in implementing those strategies? How do those strategies/initiatives address inequities?
11. Conclusion: Is there anything I haven't asked that you'd like to add? Thank you again. May I contact you if I have any follow up questions?



## **Appendix C**

IRB USE ONLY

Study Number: 2017-10-0087

Approval Date: 1/04/2018

Expires: 1/03/2021

### **Consent for Participation in Research**

**Title:** Leading with a Focus on Equity: Identifying the Leadership Traits and Actions of a Superintendent Perceived to be a Social Justice Leader

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of this form is to provide you information that may affect your decision as to whether or not to participate in this research study. The person performing the research will answer any of your questions. Read the information below and ask any questions you might have before deciding whether or not to take part. If you decide to be involved in this study, this form will be used to record your consent.

#### **Purpose of the Study**

You have been asked to participate in a research study about identification of the traits and actions of a school district superintendent, perceived to be a social justice leader, and how he or she addresses equity. The purpose of this study is to answer the following questions: What traits does a superintendent, perceived to be a social justice leader, embody to address equity in schools? What actions does a superintendent, perceived to be a social justice leader, take to meet the needs of all students? How does a superintendent, perceived to be a social justice leader, address equity in a school district? What experiences does a superintendent, perceived to be a social justice leader, credit to his focus on equity?

#### **What will you be asked to do?**

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in one 60-minute semi-structured interview with the researcher. This study will take 6 months and will include approximately 7 study participants. Your participation will be audio recorded.

#### **What are the risks involved in this study?**

There is a potential conflict of interest as the researcher is also closely associated with the participants, either as a coworker or in a position/office of oversight. Though the conflict is present, the researcher has worked to include guidelines for privacy and confidentiality.

Questions and responses from the study will only be used for research purposes and will not be used or discussed in the job setting.

In addition, the researcher will use confidentiality methods such as pseudonyms and the removal of identifying information. As it is a small case study of close associates, those in the study may be able to re-identify themselves or others in the finished study, though the everyday reader would not be able to make an identification.

**What are the possible benefits of this study?**

You will receive no direct benefit from participating in this study; however, your participation will further the research around educational leadership and equity.

**Do you have to participate?**

No, your participation is voluntary. You may decide not to participate at all or, if you start the study, you may withdraw at any time. Withdrawal or refusing to participate will not affect your relationship with the researcher, Austin Independent School District, or The University of Texas at Austin (University) in anyway.

If you would like to participate please return a signed copy of this consent form to the researcher. You will receive a copy of this form.

**Will there be any compensation?**

You will not receive any type of payment participating in this study.

**How will your privacy and confidentiality be protected if you participate in this research study?**

Throughout the research project confidentiality will be maintained. The researcher will assign participants and the district a pseudonym in the writing and the researcher will make every reasonable effort to exclude information that may allow readers to identify participants. The researcher will use this pseudonym in all products of the interview and observations, including notes. The researcher will also destroy the digital recording of the interviews after completion of the project as another way to protect participant privacy.

If it becomes necessary for the Institutional Review Board to review the study records, information that can be linked to you will be protected to the extent permitted by law. Your research records will not be released without your consent unless required by law or a court order.

If you choose to participate in this study, you will be audio recorded. Any audio recordings will be stored securely and only the researcher will have access to the recordings. Recordings will be kept for the duration of the study and then erased.

**Whom to contact with questions about the study?**

Prior, during or after your participation you can contact the researcher, Brian Hill at 512-554-8034 or send an email to [brianhill@utexas.edu](mailto:brianhill@utexas.edu) for any questions or if you feel that you have been harmed.

This study has been reviewed and approved by The University Institutional Review Board and the study number is 2017-10-0087.

**Whom to contact with questions concerning your rights as a research participant?**

For questions about your rights or any dissatisfaction with any part of this study, you can contact, anonymously if you wish, the Institutional Review Board by phone at (512) 471-8871 or email at [orsc@uts.cc.utexas.edu](mailto:orsc@uts.cc.utexas.edu).

**Signature**

You have been informed about this study's purpose, procedures, possible benefits and risks, and you have received a copy of this form. You have been given the opportunity to ask questions before you sign, and you have been told that you can ask other questions at any time. You voluntarily agree to participate in this study. By signing this form, you are not waiving any of your legal rights.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

As a representative of this study, I have explained the purpose, procedures, benefits, and the risks involved in this research study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Print Name of Person obtaining consent

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Person obtaining consent

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

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## **Vita**

Brian Paul Hill attended Connally High School in Austin, TX. In 2000, he entered The University of North Texas followed by Austin Community College and then East Texas Baptist University. In 2005, he earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in Religion with a minor in Youth Ministry. In 2005, he became a youth pastor in Austin, TX. In 2008, he earned an alternative teaching certification for grades 4 through 8 and became an elementary school teacher in the Austin Independent School District in Austin, TX. In spring of 2009, he was awarded Elementary Campus Teacher of Promise by the Austin Independent School District. In spring of 2011, he was awarded Campus Teacher of the Year by the Austin Independent School District. In 2012, he earned a Master of Education Degree in Educational Administration from the University of Texas at Austin. In 2012, he became an assistant principal at an elementary school in the Austin Independent School District. In spring 2014, he accepted a position to become assistant principal at a middle school in the Austin Independent School District. In fall 2014, he became an Administrative Supervisor for the Associate Superintendent of Area 2 Elementary Schools in the Austin Independent School District. In 2015, Brian became the principal of an elementary school in the Austin Independent School District. In 2015, he began his doctoral work in Educational Administration at the University of Texas at Austin as a member of Cooperative Superintendency Program, Cohort 26. In 2017, he accepted a position as the Special Projects Lead for the Superintendent in the Austin

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